



**TRAGEDY AND  
CONSPIRACY**

.....  
**THE 9/11 ATTACK**  
**TWENTY YEARS ON**

**FILMING THE IMPOSSIBLE** THE COTTINGLEY FAIRIES ON DISPLAY

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# ForteanTimes

ARTHUR C. CLARKE'S  
**MYSTERIOUS  
WORLD**

FT410 OCTOBER 2021

£4.80

**ANCIENT ALIENS, MISSING  
APEMEN & THE SKULL OF  
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TV CLASSIC REVISITED**

**GOLDEN DAWN  
DOWN UNDER**

THE FORGOTTEN HISTORY  
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**THE SAI KUNG  
MYSTERY**

WHY ARE HIKERS  
VANISHING IN A HONG  
KONG BEAUTY SPOT?





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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## A LESS MYSTERIOUS WORLD?



Forty-one years ago, in September 1980, what must rank as one of the classics of fortean television was first broadcast to an astonished nation. Its unforgettable opening credits featured the Mitchell-Hedges crystal skull, ominous synth music and the promise of perplexing and terrifying mysteries guaranteed to lodge in impressionable young minds: “Does an ape man walk the uncharted forests of America’s Northwest? What unknown monster of the sea grappled with this US Navy Frigate in South American waters? And whose hands fashioned the Skull of Doom? Does it bring death?”

Pondering these and other mysteries was British SF legend Arthur C Clarke, whose presence gave ITV’s groundbreaking series a gravitas that its numerous progeny – cable TV shows such as *Ancient Aliens*, covered in this month’s TV reviews – have tended to lack. In this issue, Ryan Shirlow faces his childhood fears and reassesses *Arthur C Clarke’s Mysterious World*, episode by episode, asking whether its various “mysteries” have stood the test of time or been largely explained by advances in our knowledge in the intervening decades.

Elsewhere, Noel Rooney marks another, less happy, September anniversary: 20 years since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. As Noel suggests, while the terrible events of that day resulted in all kinds of geopolitical real-world fallout, it was perhaps the shift in our relationship to ‘official narratives’ that changed the most: ‘conspiracy theories’ had begun to circulate before the fires in Lower Manhattan had even been extinguished, and they have continued to circulate ever since, providing an uncomfortable counterpoint to whatever mood music the US Government of the day decides to play. We may never know the complete truth about what happened on 11 September 2001; some mysteries really might be with us forever.

#### CALVINE UFO PHOTOS UPDATE

New information has reached David Clarke following the publication of his update on the UFO photograph taken at Calvin in Scotland just before the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990 (FT409:52-3). Two senior MoD officials who saw the photographs in 1992 after they were sent by the CIA to the Pentagon have come forward to state they were later assessed as fakes. Air Commodore Simon Baldwin, who was the British Air Attaché in Washington DC at the time described the image, that shows a diamond-shaped object shadowed by a RAF Harrier jet, as “an aerial version of the Loch Ness Monster”. For the latest updates see David’s blogpost here:

<https://drdavidclarke.co.uk/2021/07/31/the-ufo-that-never-was-the-calvine-photographs/>

#### ERRATA

**406:35:** Nidge Solly spotted a captioning cock-up in Merrily Harpur’s piece on Anomalous Big Cats. The photo of Wes Germer describes him as the host of the “Sasquatch Encounters” podcast. He is, in fact, the host of “Sasquatch Chronicles” – as, we must admit, is clearly evidenced by the words emblazoned on his hat.

**FT409:75:** John Harris emailed to point out that the phantom children beside an upturned boat, seen by Stephen Roberts in 1977, cannot have been at Wrexham, which is on the tidal part of the Dee estuary, about 20km (12 miles) due south of the North Wales coast. Rob Gandy, too, was puzzled by the reference to Wrexham’s “sand and shingle” and the quayside “looking out on to a wide expanse of sand and sea” as the town is “over 20 miles from the nearest beach!” The confusion was the result of an editorial mistake. Mr Roberts tells us that his sighting actually occurred in the area between Connahs Quay and Mostyn where the sea comes in.

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## A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT 2

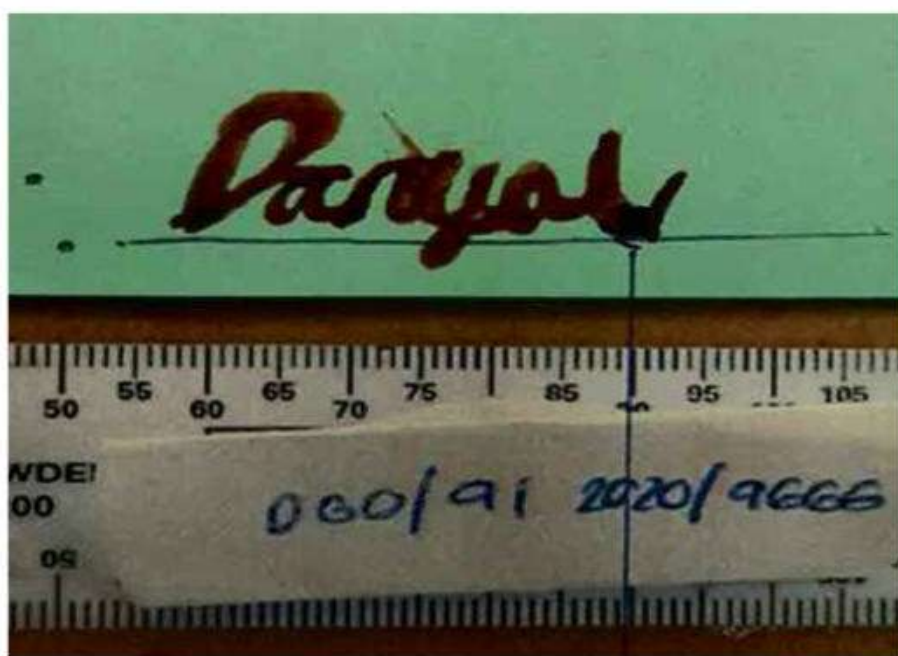
Self-styled Satanists and neo-Nazis, plus DIY exorcisms and serpent DNA

### DEMONIC MURDER UPDATE

Following Danyal Hussein's conviction for the murders of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, carried out as part of a pact he believed he had contracted with the demon Lucifuge Rofocale in order to win the lottery (see **FT409:28**), more has emerged about the background to the killings. At the time of the crime, Hussein had only just been discharged from the government's Prevent anti-extremism programme, having been placed on it by teachers concerned about his viewing of pictures of corpses and extreme right-wing material. While on the programme, though, he had also started actively participating in online occult forums. Police investigations into this aspect of the case were hampered by Hussein refusing to give up the passwords for an encrypted iPad and the failure of a case in US courts to get a ruling that would require Apple to break the encryption, but a BBC investigation has managed to gain a picture of Hussein's online occult activities.

It appears that Hussein was interested initially in using occult means to get a girlfriend. One of his posts read: "I've been wondering if I should work with King Beleth... I need a spirit who could help me out with love and fidelity." Soon, Hussein moved on to looking at occult means of enriching himself and was posting on a forum devoted to Satanism, which he joined in July 2018 and on which he remained active until just hours before he killed Henry and Smallman.

The main forum in which



*Hussein had just been discharged from the Prevent programme*

Hussein participated was run by an American self-styled black magician calling himself EA Koetting (actually Matthew Lawrence, from Utah, who has a long history of drug and weapons charges). As well as presiding over the forum, Koetting sells expensive books and courses

expounding his beliefs, much like any other New Age huckster targeting the vulnerable and credulous online. While he seems to be considered something of a joke by many occult believers, there would appear to be a darker side to Koetting and his work than his laughable Facebook videos might suggest.

Hussein introduced himself to Koetting's 'Becoming a Living God' forum by saying that he was a "psychic vampire" and that he "loved EA and his work". The beliefs Hussein expressed relating to the murders closely mirror some of those espoused by Koetting, for example making a pact with Lucifuge Rofocale in order to gain money. Koetting also says such pacts must be signed in blood and that the demon's signature can only be seen by the supplicant. Hussein signed his pact in blood, leaving

an empty space where Lucifuge would presumably have signed. Koetting also counselled that such a pact needed "real-world action" to succeed; in his books, he quotes Ian Brady, encourages murder, and gives instructions on how to kill with a knife to make a ritual sacrifice.

Several of Koetting's earlier and most extreme books appear to have been written for the neo-Nazi Satanist group, Tempel ov Blood, who are seen as a left-hand path Satanist grouping for their embrace of violence and extreme occult practices. As with many religions, Satanism contains a wide spectrum of views, with organisations like the non-violent and media-friendly Satanic Temple (see **FT383:42-43**) acting more as a satirical provocation to US religious fundamentalism than an active promoter of evil. But given that Satanism is an inherently left-hand path, to be seen as "left-hand path Satanists" requires a serious commitment to some very dark things. Believers espouse a particularly austere form of social Darwinism that is entirely focused on power and blood, achieving dominance by culling the weak and using murder to achieve their aims. Tempel ov Blood have links with the more established Order of the Nine Angles, which members claim was founded in Shropshire in the 1960s and which now seems to have an international presence wherever the occult and extreme right politics coincide. Police believe they had an influence on seven cases over the last two years where young men were sentenced for neo-Nazi terror offences in the UK, and there is an increasing belief that accessing material on extreme occult practices should be a red flag for potential neo-Nazi terrorist affiliations. *S. People, 11 July; BBC News, 13 Aug 2021.*

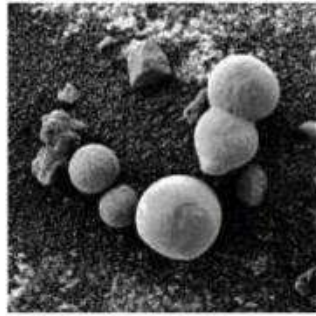




## PHALLIC ROUND-UP

Giant willy housing estate and other news

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## SPACE SHROOMS

Mushrooms on Mars and more weird life forms

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## BAD NEWS BEARS

When ursine antics get out of hand

PAGE 26

## FRAGILE SOCIAL DARWINISTS

Recently published research by Piotr Radkiewicz of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Krystyna Skarzynska of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland, looked at the characteristics of believers in the kind of dog-eat-dog social Darwinism espoused by the left-hand path Satanists. Their work has linked such beliefs to dysfunctional psychological characteristics including exploitative attitudes towards others, hostility, and low self-esteem. Social Darwinists are more likely to display admiration for power, have a desire to dominate, will pursue their goals at all costs, and exhibit more hostility than most people. They were also more likely to have low self-esteem, low self-sufficiency, and a fearful attachment style in their close relationships, worshipping strength and power to compensate for a fragile self-image. *Medical Press*, 11 Aug 2021.

## QANON KILLINGS

While packing for a family camping holiday, surfing school owner Matthew Taylor Coleman, 40, of Santa Barbara, California, suddenly took off with his two-year-old son and 10-month-old daughter in the family van, leaving his wife behind. He drove them to Rosarito, Mexico, where he shot both children in the chest with a spear fishing gun and abandoned their bodies in a ditch where they were discovered by a farmworker. Coleman was detained by the FBI at a border checkpoint and when questioned explained that he had been enlightened by QAnon and Illuminati conspiracy theories and had received a series of visions and signs that his wife possessed "serpent DNA" and had passed it on to their children, so he had killed them before it could "turn them into monsters". Coleman's wife said she had not believed the children were in any danger and that she had not had "any sort of argument" with him before he left. Coleman told investigators that he "knew it was wrong, but it was the



ABOVE LEFT: Dr Hossam Metwally attempted to exorcise Kelly Wilson with a combination of drugs and Islamic rituals. ABOVE RIGHT: Matthew Taylor Coleman.



only course of action that would save the world". *cbsnews.com*, 12 Aug 2021.

## DRUGS AND DJINN

Believing his partner, Kelly Wilson, 33, was possessed by a large number of djinn, Dr Hossam Metwally, 61, an NHS anaesthetist and chronic pain specialist, carried out Islamic exorcism rituals, known as *Ruqya*, on her at their home in Grimsby in an attempt to expel the supernatural entities. Starting in 2016, he performed more than 250 rituals, in which he recited verses of the Koran over Wilson and anointed her with holy water and oils. He also heavily sedated her and recorded the exorcisms. In one of the videos Metwally can be heard chanting "Bismillah Allah-hu-Akbar" over Wilson, who is tied down with black cords, as he drugs her through a cannula inserted in one of her veins. He then continues chanting, before asking "Did you get her?" about a Djinni he names as "Magdulina", going on to repeatedly say "Bismillah. Go to them in your head." (The Gang of Fort half-expected the djinni to

reply: "Bismillah, no! We will not let her go!")

Metwally's behaviour came to the notice of authorities when Wilson had to be rushed to hospital after falling into a coma during one of the exorcisms. She was found to be on the brink of cardiac arrest and suffered multiple organ failure, but survived. Searching Metwally's house, police found a "vast stock of drugs" including ketamine, propofol, fentanyl and Diazemuls. At his trial at Sheffield Crown Court an Imam testified that *Ruqya* was a legitimate Islamic ritual, but that it should never involve drugs or restraint. Metwally claimed that Wilson was "a beautiful, nice girl who became a monster who wanted to attack me," and that he had "performed a *Ruqya* out of kindness to help her."

Judge Jeremy Richardson QC said that "in 41 years of experience in the criminal justice system of this country, I have never been involved in or presided over a more bizarre trial than this one." *BBC News*, *D. Telegraph*, *Grimsby Telegraph*, 7 Aug 2021.

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

**QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY HONOURS 2021: EVERY CAMBRIDGESHIRE PERSON HONOURED, INCLUDING ANDY HOPPER, SAM DYER AND BILLY BOYLE**

cambridgeindependent.co.uk, 11 June 2021,

**Hospital tells sick people to stay away**

The Kerryman, via Irish Independent, 17 Oct 2015.

**PRINCE CHARMING SELFIE SHATTERS PRIESTHOOD DREAM FOR SEMINARIAN**

Irish Times, 8 May 2021.

**Fish and chips enjoyed at Edgbaston Women Zionists bazaar**

Birmingham Jewish Recorder, - 1982.



# ROCK ON!

Enthusiasts take part in the European Stone Stacking Championships on 10 July in Dunbar, Scotland. The competition, now in its fifth year, is Europe's largest event for all stone stacking and rock balancing enthusiasts and artists.

**PHOTOS:** Jeff J Mitchell / Getty Images.











## SIDELINES...

### GRAUMAD

To celebrate 200 years of publication, the *Guardian*, famed for its misprints, reprinted some of its most celebrated ones. These included: “We misspelled the word misspelled twice, as misspelled, in the Corrections and clarifications column on September 26”, and a review mentioning the band “Frightened Rabbi”, corrected the next day to “[That] should have been... Frightened Rabbit”. A similar loss of a letter rendered a Miles Davis album “Sketches of Pain” instead of “Spain” and created the digestive complaint “irritable bowl syndrome”. *Guardian*, 12 May 2021.

### STUCK SPAMEL

When a 93-year-old woman from Matlock, Derbyshire, reported her Cavalier King Charles spaniel, Toby, missing after not seeing him for two days, PC Tammy Wood visited the house to take a statement. While there, she dropped something, and when she bent down to pick it up, saw Toby’s face peering out from under a recliner chair where he had become stuck. After being freed, he was none the worse for his ordeal. *Metro*, 3 June 2021.

### TOUR DE-STRUCTION

Chaos descended on the Tour de France cycle race after a spectator stepped out of the crowd in front of the cyclists to hold up a sign to TV cameras. The sign, reading “Allez Opi-Omi” (Go Granny and Grandpa), caught the arm of rider Tony Martin, knocking him from his bike and caused a domino effect, bringing down 20 more cyclists in one of the worst crashes in the history of the race. One rider was injured so badly that he had to withdraw. The spectator fled but is being sought by police and risks up to a year in prison. *Metro*, 28 June; *Sun*, 1 July 2021.



## COVID CORNER

Dogs can sniff out Covid, but having sex doesn’t stop you from catching the virus



ABOVE: Experimental training for sniffer dogs to detect Covid-19 at the Campus Bio-medico University Hospital in Rome.

### SNIFFING OUT COVID

In a bid to speed up Covid testing at airports and other public buildings, research has been carried out to see if dogs can be trained to detect people infected with Covid-19 by smell alone. Sniffer dogs have already been trained to detect the distinctive odours of diseases like cancer, malaria and Parkinson’s, picking up scents that are far below the level at which humans can smell them (see **FT339:22-23, 378:24**). Six dogs were given socks, face masks, T-shirts and other items that had been worn by Covid sufferers to accustom them to the smell, then given rewards when they correctly identified whether a test item belonged to someone with Covid or not. In the tests, dogs were found to pick up 88% of infections, including ones where the patient was asymptomatic, which is almost as good as PCR tests, which pick up 96% of cases, and significantly better than lateral flow tests, which are around 72% accurate. They were also able to identify infections whichever variant was involved. While dogs alone would not be able to confirm that a person was infected, they could be used as a first line of

defence, as two dogs can screen 300 people in half an hour. Any they give a positive result for could then be given a PCR test to confirm the diagnosis. While these initial tests have been very successful, it will need further, more detailed laboratory work before dogs can be deployed to check people at mass gatherings. *BBC News*, 24 May; *Times*, 2 June 2021.

### DOUBLE COVID

The first known case of someone being infected with two Covid strains simultaneously has been reported from Belgium. A 90-year-old woman who died in March was found to have had both the Alpha and Beta strains, it was reported in a press conference at the 2021 European Congress on Clinical Microbiology & Infectious Diseases (ECCMID). Normally people have only one strain of a virus. It is not clear how the woman became infected, but it is possible that she could have caught the infection from two different people at around the same time. Molecular biologist Anne Vankeerberghen said that even though there are no other published cases of similar co-infections, researchers

believe the case shows that it is possible to catch two Covid-19 variants simultaneously and that the “phenomenon is probably underestimated”. On admission to hospital, the woman’s condition was initially stable, but then deteriorated quickly and she died five days later. Vankeerberghen said that it was difficult to tell whether the co-infection played a role in the patient’s rapid deterioration. *sciencealert.com*, 12 July 2021.

### YOU WISH!

South Africa’s National Health Department has been forced to issue a warning that sex does not prevent Covid after a fake “official government document” went viral on social media in the country. The document’s text read: “The only way we can beat this Coronavirus! Note let’s keep everyone indoors at least four to six hours a day we confirm that sex is the only medication we can use for now. Let’s try to make many rounds as we can at least four to five per day until further notice. This is for elders only a health and strong. Together we conquer.” Despite poor grammar, spelling mistakes (including misspelling “Department of

ALBERTO PIZZOLI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES





Health”) and factual errors, the document was widely believed. Commenting on the idea of sex protecting you against Covid, Dr William F Marshall of the Mayo Clinic in the US said that, far from protecting you, “coming into contact with a person’s spit through kissing or other sexual activities could expose you to the virus,” and, clearly warming to his theme in a definite case of “too much information”, added that as the virus can also spread through contact with faeces, “it’s possible that you could get Covid-19 from sexual activities that expose you to faecal matter”. *dailystar.co.uk*, 12 July 2021.

## INDONESIAN IMPOSTOR

As Indonesia found itself in the grip of the worst surge in Covid infections in Asia, a man with the virus boarded a domestic flight from Jakarta to Ternate disguised as his wife, wearing a niqab to cover his face and carrying her ID and a negative PCR test result. The man was rumbled when a flight attendant caught him changing clothes in the lavatory. Ternate police arrested him on landing, took him for a Covid test, which came back positive, and confined him at home in self isolation while they continued their investigation. *[AP]* 22 July 2021.

## UNMASKED CRIMINAL

Drug courier Paul Green was busted by police after he was stopped at Wigan station for not wearing a face mask on the train. Under questioning, he raised suspicions by being evasive about his destination, so police searched him, finding £60,000 worth of heroin and crack cocaine about his person. He was

sentenced to three years and four months in prison for possession of class A drugs with intent to supply. *BBC News*, 19 June 2021.

## NAKED AUSTRALIANS

Two Australian men were fined \$1,000 for breaking lockdown restrictions in New South Wales after they went “nude sunbathing” on a beach south of Sydney. While sunbathing they were apparently startled by a deer and fled into the bush behind the beach to escape the animal, quickly becoming lost. Police sent out a helicopter to search for them, eventually locating a 30-year-old man naked and carrying a backpack in the Royal National Park and a partially clothed 49-year-old nearby. At a press conference, New South Wales Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said it was “difficult to legislate against idiots.” He was asked if sunbathing naked on a remote beach constituted outdoor recreation, which is allowed in the Australian lockdown, but his answer was interrupted by a man claiming he was the “prime creator of this Earth” who issued Fuller with a “notice of cease and desist”. *theguardian.com*, 28 June 2021.

## PROTEST FIASCO

Anti-vaccine protesters, including Piers Corbyn, angered by what they see as the BBC’s “promotion” of covid vaccines, gathered outside Television Centre in west London with the aim of storming the building and disrupting news operations. They live streamed the event, which had been promoted widely in advance as a major protest against the BBC. On the live

stream Corbyn can be heard to say, “We’ve got to take over these bastards,” while other protestors accused the media of being the real virus and chanted “shame on you” while scuffling with police, who needed to bring in reinforcements and a helicopter to contain the protest. Unfortunately, the BBC had largely moved out of the building in 2013, and its news operation is now run from Broadcasting House in central London. Television Centre is now mainly flats, with a private members club and three residual studios that are mostly rented to other broadcasters. While protestors battled to get in, the ITV programme *Loose Women* was the only thing being filmed there. Co-host Charlene White said: “Not sure what protestors were hoping to achieve, but all they would’ve found was me, Jane, Nadia and Penny... talking about the menopause”. *irishtimes.com*, 10 Aug 2021.

## FAKE VACCINE NURSE

Thousands of Germans have been urgently advised to get another Covid shot after it was discovered that a Red Cross nurse in Friesland had injected them with saline solution instead of a real vaccine. Many of the estimated 8,600 people affected were elderly and in high-risk categories for Covid infection. The nurse’s motive for delivering fake vaccinations was not completely clear, but police found that she had made vaccine-sceptical posts on social media. German broadcaster NDR said the case had been handed to a unit that investigates politically motivated crimes. *Guardian*, 11 Aug 2021.

## SIDELINES...

### STALIMSAVES LIFE

Andrea Laing, 43, had her life saved by her Russian hamster, Stalin. He nipped her on the finger while she was cleaning out his cage. The wound was bad enough to require hospital treatment and tests carried out there revealed she had raised Factor VIII levels, which put her at risk of a potentially deadly blood clotting disorder. *D.Mirror*, 22 Mar 2021.

### EVERLASTING EASTER EGG

John Gartlan of Dundalk, Ireland, still has an easter egg he was given 43 years ago sitting untouched at the back of his fridge. The Trebor Kitty Cottage egg, in its green and yellow box, with a toy kitten beside it, was given to John when he was five, but he decided it was “too nice to eat” and kept it in the fridge. Four fridges later it is still there. “The egg is still wrapped in foil but there is a little bit exposed and it doesn’t look mouldy – but I still wouldn’t chance tasting it,” he says. *Irish Independent*, 3 Apr 2021.

### CHARLES DETHROMED

Prince Charles has lost his status as owner of Britain’s oldest working fridge. A working 1930s Electrolux belonging to a Gloucestershire couple, who prefer to remain anonymous, has taken the title from Charles’s Frigidaire, which was bought for the Castle of Mey by the Queen Mother in 1954. The new record holder was discovered when local fridge salesman Jonathan Kerry visited the owners. “He found it like it was Tutankhamun – like all was revealed. It was a look of amazement on his face,” they said. *D.Mirror*, 20 July 2021.

### PARPAL DUMPLIM

A new species of sponge discovered off the Norfolk coast has been given the official name “Parpal Dumplin” after the Marine Conservation Society asked local children to use their creativity and name it. The winner, named only as Sylvie, from Langham Village School, noted it was purple and looked like a dumpling, so came up with the name in the local dialect. The species, new to science, is in a sub-genus of sponges known as *Hymedesmia* (*Stylopus*). *<i>*, 29 Apr 2021



LEON NEAL / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE LEFT: A signer at a police press conference has to sign “nude sunbathers scared by deer”. ABOVE RIGHT: Piers Corbyn.





## SIDELINES...

### VAGINA REHOMING

The world's only vagina museum is seeking a new home after Camden Lock Market, London, where it is currently based, decided not to renew its lease, opting to let the space to a clothes shop instead. The museum, founded in 2017 as a response to the famed Iceland Phallological Museum (**FT135:26, 277:22**), is the "world's first bricks-and-mortar museum dedicated to vaginas, vulvas and the gynæ anatomy." *boingboing.net*, 4 Aug 2021.

### SPAMHEMGE

Matthew Richardson, 45, of Leeds calls himself "Hengemaster" after making more than 350 replicas of Stonehenge from food and household objects. The materials he has used to construct his henges include cheese, spam and jelly. *Metro*, 1 July 2021

### CTHULHU LIVES!

Fishers in South Korea's South Gyeongsang province were about to throw back an octopus they had caught when they realised it had 32 tentacles instead of the usual eight. The extra limbs were growing out of its original ones like branches from a tree. Octopuses can grow multiple tentacles when they are injured if "overgeneration" occurs during healing. The record for extra tentacles is held by an octopus caught in Japan in 1998 which had 96 limbs, and an 85-legged one was recorded in 1957. *Sun*, 25 June 2021.

### RUBBER RETRIBUTION

A quick-thinking assistant in a sex shop in Novokuznetsk, Russia, foiled a robbery with an item from the store's own stock. When a masked thief pulled a knife on her and demanded the contents of the till, she grabbed a massive 18-inch (46cm) double-ended rubber dildo from under the counter and thrashed the robber with it until he fled. *dailymail.co.uk*, 27 July 2021.



MARTIN ROSS

## PRIVATES ON PARADE



Strange but true, or cock and balls stories?

LEFT: Plans for a new Loughborough housing estate revealed phallic shapes.

### GIANT COCK-UP

Residents of Loughborough, Leicestershire, were less than impressed when builders Persimmon unveiled plans for a new estate in the town. Seen from above, the estate's cul-de-sacs look like a series of male genitalia. Loughborough resident Gary Moore, 40, said "Nobody wants a willy-shaped housing estate on their doorsteps. They are massive as well; you could probably see them from space" A spokesman for the developer said the design will "provide sufficient turning space for larger vehicles". *Metro*, 4 June 2021.

### CUT OFF IN HIS PRIME

After repeated sexual assaults by the owner of the Barcelona bar where she worked as a waitress, a 35-year-old woman turned on her assailant and severed the would-be rapist's penis with a knife. The man, who was not named, was rushed to hospital for surgery while the woman was arrested for assault. *D.Telegraph*, 2 June 2021.

### CUT OFF AFTER HIS PRIME

In the Brazilian city of São Goncalo, Dayane Cristiana Rodrigues Machado, 33, was arrested for murdering her husband Andre, with whom she ran a pizzeria, then cutting off his penis and frying it in soyabean oil. Andre's sister said that Machado had done it in revenge for her husband cheating on her, but Machado's lawyer said that Andre threatened her, and she killed him in self-defence. She has

*"Nobody wants a giant willy-shaped housing estate on their doorstep"*

been charged with murder and corpse desecration. *Sun*, 10 June 2021.

### AMATEUR CASTRATIONS

Queensland electrician Ryan King received a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence after he advertised castration services on a eunuch website and carried out the procedure on two men who responded. King, whose only medical qualification was an advanced first aid certificate, castrated the men in a backpacker's hostel and kept some of the body parts he removed in his home freezer. The two men desired the procedure but could find no legal way of having it done, so turned to King to achieve their aim. One of the men, who suffered genital dysphoria, said in a submission to the court: "I am eternally grateful to Ryan for enabling me to enjoy life." King didn't receive payment for the castrations but was allowed to film one procedure and post it on the eunuch site. He was arrested when he was unable to control the bleeding after the second procedure and had to call paramedics, to whom he admitted removing the man's

genitals and flushing them down the toilet. Police then searched King's house where they found medical equipment and severed genitals in the freezer. In court King said he did not realise he was breaking the law as both men he operated on had consented, but the judge concluded: "The message must be sent to people in the community that you cannot do things like this." *guardian.com*, 16 July 2021.

### SHAFTED

A 30-year-old man arrested in Florida for drug offenses was found to have four crystal rocks of methamphetamine hidden in his genitals. The suspect, who had a long history of drug convictions, was named Shaft Bang Adams. *D.Mirror*, 26 June 2021.

### PADLOCKED PENIS

A 38-year-old Bangkok man has ended up with a permanently disfigured penis after he left it stuck in a padlock for two weeks. After attaching the lock to the base of his member because he "was bored" due to the pandemic, he lost the key and only sought help when his penis became infected and painfully swollen, narrowly avoiding gangrene. His mother said: "He told me he likes putting his 'thing' through small holes – I've told him not to do it again." *S.People*, 18 July 2021.

### NAZI BOLLOCKS

A 29-year-old Austrian soldier has been jailed for 19 months after getting a swastika tattooed on his scrotum. The symbol, banned in Austria, was inked on the private's parts by his brother, whom he asked to do it after drinking two bottles of whisky. The soldier was arrested after posting a photo of it online. He was also accused of illegal firearms possession and "drinking Hitler-branded wine". In court, he expressed remorse saying he realised what 'nonsense' Nazi glorification was once the investigation into his inflammatory testicles began. *dailymail.co.uk*, 10 June 2021.





## UNSEEN FORCES | Mysterious fires, invisible stone-throwers and phantom poopers

### MYSTERY FIRES

Throughout April, the village of Choto Singia Munshipara in Thakurgaon, Bangladesh, was besieged by mysterious fires. Blazes with no obvious source suddenly broke out, destroying furniture, clothes, straw heaps, sacks of grain and sometimes whole rooms at seemingly random locations across the village, despite vigilance from the residents. Fire pumps were set up all round the village and most of the 80 households there kept pots of water within reach in case of a sudden conflagration. Families did not sleep due to their fear of the fires and most have moved their possessions into their courtyards to try and protect them. Investigation by police and firefighters failed to pin down the source of the blazes.

The first fire took place in a house belonging to a villager called Muslim Uddin and was quickly extinguished by firefighters, but almost immediately afterwards another began in a villager's straw heap. Subsequently, over 50 fires have sprung up in the small village, with the frequency of the blazes increasing by the week throughout April. Villager Amena Begum said they cannot leave clothes on the racks where they are usually kept without them getting burnt, and that they now have to leave their clothes on the ground to save them. Police have been asked to strengthen patrols and have detained 12 people in connection with the fires. However, Delwar Hossain, Station Officer of Baliadangi Fire Service and Civil Defence, said that while "we cannot say the exact reason of the fires on the houses" he had ruled out any supernatural causes. *Daily Star (Bangladesh)*, 4 May 2021.

For other reports of combustion clusters and unexplained fiery outbreaks, see: **FT38:32** (Pyrenees); **FT44:43-44** (West Virginia); **FT55:28** (Italy); **FT107:17** (Swaziland); **FT183:8-9, 185:5, 231:24** (Spain, Sicily and Italy); **FT281:40-44** (Malaysia and Queensland); **FT302:42-45** (Turkey); **FT308:40-41** (Jamaica); **FT328:10** (Thailand).



ABOVE: Villagers in Choto Singia Munshipara try to douse one of the mysterious fires.

### STONE ME!

Poltergeist-like attacks also put the Surrey village of Stanwell under siege in June. Villagers took to wearing cycle helmets whenever they left their homes because a mystery stone-thrower had been continually pelting houses in the village with large rocks, causing significant damage. On arriving in Russell Drive, which was at the centre of the attacks, police were met with a barrage of rocks with no obvious source; one smashed a police car's wing mirror, and another landed just a few centimetres away from an officer. Neighbourhood Sergeant Paul Grinter of Surrey Police said: "The residents cannot enjoy their gardens, cannot open their windows and cannot park outside their homes... It is only a matter of time before someone is injured." Police believed the attacks were the work of an elusive catapult-user hiding in a nature reserve that backs on to houses and later arrested a 20-year-old man on suspicion of criminal damage and common assault; it's unclear whether he was caught red handed with a catapult. *Sun*, 17+18 June 2021.

### SUSSEX SHITTER

A Sussex family targeted by someone splattering their property with explosive diarrhoea finally flushed the culprit out by installing CCTV. For over two years, the family from Hove would wake up several times a week to find the alley behind their house had been used as a toilet. "You'll wake up and there would be poo as you are leaving the house, then

you'll see his token piece of toilet paper – it's like a calling card," said the owner, who wished to remain anonymous. "I bought flowers as I thought he would stop if it looked nice in the area. In fact, he just shat on the flowers." The frequency of the defecations made the family suspect they were being deliberately targeted. After installing the CCTV, they successfully filmed a man defecating in their alley and reported him to police. *D.Express*, 15 June 2021.

### FÆCAL VENDETTA

Matthew Guyette of Greenville, Ohio, finally caught Jerry Detrick, 70, defecating and urinating on his lawn at 3.15 in the morning on 30 May. Detrick, who lived a couple of blocks from Guyette, had been leaving faeces accompanied by restaurant napkins he'd used to wipe himself in Guyette's garden for more than 10 years. A self-described "Trump man", Detrick told police, who arrested him for "littering", that he targeted Guyette and his family because they "are Democrats and support Joe Biden". *Smoking Gun*, 3 June 2021.

### POO PUZZLE

Police mulled over the possible reasons for someone to steal a dog poo bin from a seaside resort. It was unscrewed from its mounting and taken at Fisherman's Cove in East Portlemouth, Devon, sometime between 12 and 13 March. Officers were looking for leads to locate the bin, "but not its contents". *BBC News*, 17 Mar 2019.

## SIDELINES...

### DEAD WROMG

Passers-by in Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight, were startled to find a private ambulance parked outside the Co-op funeral home with Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" blasting out through its open door. The driver had stepped into the funeral home to collect bodies for transport, leaving the radio playing in his van when the unfortunate selection came on, prompting someone to film the vehicle and post it on social media. *dailymail.co.uk*, 9 July 2021.

### PERSEVERANCE REWARDED

Civil engineer Will Cutbill, 23, took advantage of lockdown to make a successful attempt on the Guinness World Record for the tallest stack of M&M sweets. After hundreds of tries over two days, Cutbill managed to stack five of the elliptical sweets on top of each other, beating the previous record of four. "I'm buzzing," he said, "I think six is impossible." *Sun*, 3 July 2021.

### FLAMIM HECK!

Russian hot rod enthusiast Vahan Mikaelyan, already famed on social media for building a car that walks on eight legs, topped this bizarre creation by converting a VAZ-2106 Zhiguli, known in the UK as a Lada 1600, to shoot 20ft (6m) jets of flame from its headlamps. He was planning to hold an event where the vehicle, dubbed "The Dragon", would set another car on fire. *[UPI]* 4 Aug 2021.

### MAMHOLES MISSING

Police in Kent were baffled by the theft of 30 manhole covers from Knoll Lane, Ashford, without anyone noticing. They said: "We would like to hear from anyone who saw people acting suspiciously... they may have had the appearance of highway workers with a vehicle." *Mail on Sunday*, 16 May 2021.

### SHARK SOUVENIR

After an attack in South Australia that cost Chris Blowes one of his legs and put him in a coma for 10 days, he was exempted from Australia's strict wildlife laws that prohibit ownership of material from protected species and allowed to keep the tooth that the Great White Shark responsible left wedged in his surfboard. *<i>*





## SIDELINES...

### FEELING THE EARTH MOVE

At a hearing on climate change, Texas Republican congressman Louie Gohmert asked forestry official Jennifer Eberlein whether it was possible to alter the orbits of the Earth or Moon to combat global heating, saying “obviously that would have profound effects on our climate.” Eberlein diplomatically suggested she would have to “follow up with you on that one, Mr Gohmert.” *Guardian*, 11 June 2021.

### UMDEAD LIME

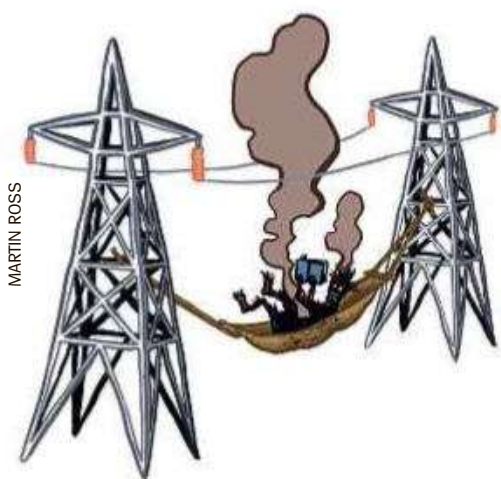
In the two days after the Champlain Towers South apartment block in Surfside, Florida, collapsed, Jake Samuelson received 16 phone calls from the landline in the apartment of his missing grandparents Arnie Notkin, 87, and Myriam, 81, the first just hours after the collapse. On answering the calls, all Jake heard was static, while calls back to the number gave an engaged tone. *metro.co.uk*, 28 June 2021.

### FRIGHTEMMING FOOTPRINTS

Police in Dunedin, New Zealand, were called out by a young woman who was disturbed to discover a pair of footprints in her doorway when she returned from a function at 1.20am. After investigating, police concluded that the footprints, which were in a salt-like material, were her own. *Otago Daily Times*, 29 July 2021.

### HIGH RISK HAMMOCKS

Sheriffs in Utah have appealed to the public to stop hanging hammocks on high voltage electricity pylons. It seems slackers seeking a lounging place with a view have been hanging their hammocks on tall pylons in the Utah desert. “There are 75,000 kilovolts that run through those power lines... The power can actually jump from the lines and strike somebody,” said Lt Cortney Ryan of the Sheriff’s department. *boingboing.net*, 4 Aug 2021.



## FOOTBALLS OF THE GODS



IMAGEBROKER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



CHRISTOPHER MICHEL

ABOVE: Some of the massive stone spheres that litter Champ Island; geologists have yet to agree on their origin.

The uninhabited Champ Island, part of the Franz Joseph archipelago in the Arctic Circle, is littered with giant stone spheres up to two metres (6.6ft) in diameter which visitors have nicknamed “Football of the Gods”. The massive globes resemble those found in Costa Rica, which are known to have been made by humans between 600 and the Spanish conquest in 1550. There is no evidence though of any civilisation, or even human occupation,

on Champ Island, nor is any considered likely due to its hostile climate, and scientists cannot agree how the huge balls were formed. Nearby Heiss Island was found last year to contain similar but much smaller stone balls the size of bullets or cannon balls, but they have not helped identify the origin of the Champ Island “footballs” with seemingly every geologist having his or her own theory. Australian geologist Sepp Fridhubera believes the

rounded shapes of the rocks point to an underwater origin, claiming that they have an organic core at the centre: “I believe that they were formed in sea water, in soft deposits from the remains of shells that once drowned and got stuck in the sandy bottom.” Others point to a different sedimentary origin for the spheres or consider them to be related to glaciation. See also the Moeraki Boulders, **FT248:74-75**. *rbth.com*, 11 Nov 2019; *helenastales.com*, 6 June 2021.



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## EXHIBITION REPORT

# THE COTTINGLEY FAIRIES ON DISPLAY

**DAVID CLARKE** visits Leeds to see the photos that fooled Arthur Conan Doyle and other original artefacts from the most famous fairy sighting of them all



Five photographs of fairies dancing at the bottom of a Yorkshire garden that became “the world’s longest running hoax” are the focus of a compelling new exhibition.

The Cottingley Fairies legend began in the summer of 1917 as the Great War raged in the trenches of the Western Front. Schoolgirl Elsie Wright, 16, took a photograph of her nine-year-old cousin Frances Griffiths posing with some tiny dancing figures that she had drawn and attached to hat pins arranged around the Cottingley Beck, between Bradford and Bingley, in West Yorkshire.

According to the exhibition it all began with a tall tale. One day the youngsters were scolded after they returned home from the beck with wet feet. Frances explained that she went there “to see the fairies”. Her story was greeted with disbelief, so the girls borrowed Elsie’s father’s Midgley quarter

plate camera, determined to provide proof. They came back with two photos, one showing Frances with the dancing fairies and a second showing Elsie with a leaping gnome.

In the aftermath of the war the girls’ mothers shared the curious images at a meeting of the Theosophy Society in Bradford. News reached one of its senior members, Edward Gardner, who was convinced they were genuine. From here the prank spiralled out of control when Gardner sent them to his friend, the Sherlock Holmes author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Doyle had converted to Spiritualism during the war and wanted to use the images in his ongoing battle with sceptics. He deliberately courted controversy, describing the fairy photos as “an epoch-making event” when he published the first two images in *The Strand* magazine during 1920. Doyle

never met the young women, but Gardner visited the beck and said he felt “energies” there. He arranged for a photographer, Harold Snelling, to make “improvements” to the photos and left Elsie and Frances with a new Kodak camera. He clearly hoped they would produce more evidence and, sure enough, in the summer of 1920, the girls took three more images of fairies dancing around the beck.

The women stuck to their stories for 60 years. Interviewed by Yorkshire TV in 1975 Elsie Wright, aged 74, said: “I have told you that they’re figments of our imagination and that’s what I’m sticking to.” But in 1983 Elsie and Frances, both grandmothers, confessed to the hoax when the truth was exposed in an article by Geoffrey Crawley, editor of the *British Journal of Photography*. Even then, Frances continued to maintain the fifth and last

image, dubbed “the Fairy sun-bath” was a genuine photograph of the little folk she had seen around the beck.

During the past century dozens of books, newspaper articles, TV documentaries and two Hollywood movies have been devoted to telling versions of the story. Few photographers today can look at these images and accept them as anything but fakes. The lighting of the ‘fairies’ does not match that of the young women and the figures have a flat, one-dimensional appearance because that was precisely what they were.

But the exhibition at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, is the first time that many of the original artefacts from the legend have been placed on public display. It tells the story in chronological order, drawing on correspondence from Doyle, Gardner and members of the girls’ families. Both cameras featured in the display are on loan from the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford after a public appeal saved them from a Christie’s auction.

The original negatives have long since disappeared, but fourth-generation copies from the batch ‘improved’ by Snelling can be scrutinised by visitors. Also on display is a copy of the *Princess Mary’s Gift Book*, published in 1914, that inspired Frances to draw the fairies. The book contained Alfred Noyes’s poem “A Spell for a Fairy”, that was illustrated with three dancing figures. They have an unmistakable similarity to those depicted in the Cottingley photographs. Ironically, the book also contained a chapter by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

The exhibition was originally planned to mark the centenary of the last three photographs that show Elsie and Frances posing with individual fairies sporting distinctive 1920s hairstyles. This big giveaway did raise some suspicions in Doyle’s inner circle, but he refused to believe two “young girls” could hoodwink the creator of Sherlock Holmes, who employed hard logic to solve riddles. In fact, Elsie was a





skilled artist and worked for a few months in a photographer's shop in Bradford where she gained experience retouching photographic plates.

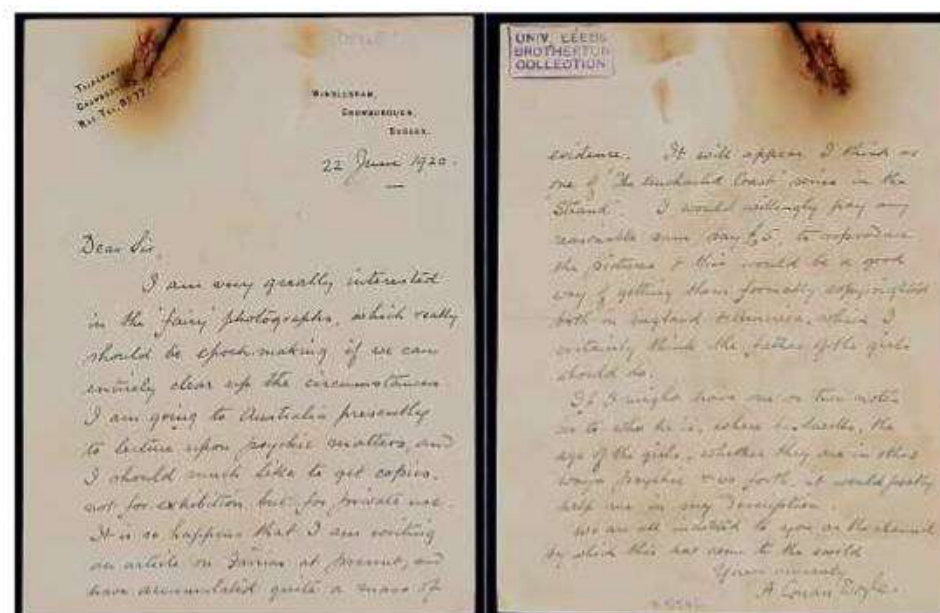
Following his death in 1969 Edward Gardner's family donated his Cottingley fairy collection to the Brotherton Library. This exhibition has been curated by Dr Merrick Burrow, head of the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Huddersfield, who summarises the story as "an accidental conspiracy".

"There were a series of minor deceptions that in themselves would not really have amounted to anything," he said. "But these were blown up into a global *cause célèbre* through the combination of Elsie's skill with the camera, the 'improvement' of the photos by an expert working for Gardner, and the involvement of Conan Doyle – probably the world's foremost popular author with an interest in Spiritualism."

In the online lecture that accompanies the exhibition Dr Burrow compares elements of the story with fake news and social media bubbles in the present day. He said in one corner there was Conan Doyle and those "who believed without question in Spiritualism" while in the other were their opponents in the Rational Press Association and opponents of Spiritualism. "Neither would give ground to the other, which is what we see now."

For earlier FT coverage, see Janet Bord, "Cottingley Unmasked", FT53:48-53, and Fiona Maher "Deceiving Doyle: The Cottingley Centenary", FT356:30-35.

**The Cottingley Fairies: a study in deception** runs until 17 Nov 2022 at the Treasures of the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds LS2 9JT. Current opening hours are Tuesday-Friday, 9am-2pm but check the website for updates: [https://library.leeds.ac.uk/events/event/375/the\\_cottingley\\_fairies\\_a\\_study\\_in\\_deception](https://library.leeds.ac.uk/events/event/375/the_cottingley_fairies_a_study_in_deception)



**FACING PAGE:** "Frances and the Fairies", taken by Elsie in July 1917 to "prove" Frances's claim of playing with the fairies at Cottingley beck. **ABOVE LEFT:** A second photo, showing that Elsie too could see fairies. "Elsie and the Gnome", September 1917. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Doyle published the two photos in the Christmas issue of *The Strand Magazine*. **LEFT:** Doyle wrote to Edward L Gardner to ask for information about Frances, Elsie and their families. He describes the fairy photographs as "epoch-making". **TOP:** The exhibition.



## PAUL DEVEREUX marvels at a preserved lion cub and ponders a pair of mysterious burials



**ABOVE LEFT:** 'Sparta', the 28,000-year-old cave lion cub found in the Siberian permafrost. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The statue of Alfred the Great in Trinity Church Square in Southwark, London; it turns out that the King's top half sits on a bottom half belonging to a Roman goddess. **BELOW:** An artist's impression of the androgynous Finnish warrior.

### LITTLE LION

'Sparta' looks as if she is curled up asleep, but this little cave lion cub is about 28,000 years old. She was given her nickname by the scientists who examined the perfectly preserved feline, found with her sibling deep in the Siberian Arctic permafrost. Her golden fur is a bit tangled but still looks stroke-able, and her whiskers, teeth, skin, and organs are preserved. And she still has sharp claws! *CNN*, 6 Aug 2021.

### RECYCLED STATUE

An imposing statue of King Alfred, the ninth-century monarch who saw off the Vikings, stands in Trinity Church Square, Southwark. It has always been touted as London's oldest, but recent restoration work presents a more complex reality. It turns out the upper part, depicting a bearded man with crown and robe, was a 19th-century addition plonked on top of a Roman sculpture dating to the 2nd century. "It is part of a cult statue of a goddess from a major temple area... which was excavated at nearby Tabard Square," says Roman sculpture expert, Professor Martin Henig. "It is extraordinary. I know no other instance of a piece of Romano-British statuary being used in creating what is a pastiche Late Mediaeval style statue." It is thought the Roman statue

originally depicted the goddess Minerva. *D. Telegraph*, 7 Aug 2021.

### IN BETWEEN

A 900-year-old grave excavated in 1968 in Finland was first assumed to be that of a male warrior because there were swords in the burial, then, later, of a female warrior because the body had been dressed in a typically female costume. But now, DNA tests tentatively show that the anatomically male person had an androgynous condition known as Klinefelter syndrome (XXY instead of XY). Researchers think it's possible that the person may have identified as non-binary – sexually in-between (or best of both worlds, depending on how one looks at it.) *livescience.com*, 6 Aug 2021.



### PAST ITS SELL-BY DATE

Fancy a doum nut, anybody? A doum nut (fruit of the doum or gingerbread palm) over 2,000 years old? Thought not. But many such were found along with grape seeds in remarkably well-preserved wicker baskets deep beneath the waters of Aboukir Bay near Alexandria, Egypt. They were in the sunken ruins of a fabled ancient Egyptian city and port called Thonis-Heracleion, which became submerged in

the second century BC, and deeper still in the eighth century AD, due to various cataclysms. Archaeological recovery work has been going on for several years by various teams, and continues, because the thick sediment of the large site is so rich, yielding many treasures. These include not only pottery, bronze artefacts, coins and figurines, and hundreds of ceramic objects, but also building ruins and colossal statues – even a virtually complete second-century BC Egyptian naval vessel. Despite all this, one of the researchers, Franck Goddio, reckons only a small percentage of the overall site has yet been uncovered. *Guardian*, 2 Aug, *Smithsonianmag*, 4 Aug 2021.

### MANGLED

The century-old mystery of a male skeleton buried 3,000 years ago in a communal graveyard near Japan's Seto Sea has now been solved. It was a mystery because the man, who belonged to the Late Jomon hunter-gatherer culture, had been badly mangled, his skeleton showing over 790 injuries. But recent expert analysis reveals the poor fellow had been fatally savaged by a shark. This hadn't been suspected for so long because the graveyard was on land, sharks don't usually leave enough of a victim to bury, and the nearby Seto Sea is inland. But, in fact, it links the Pacific Ocean with the Sea of Japan, and happens to be a favoured through-way for sharks. This find is the most ancient shark-attack victim yet identified, predating a Greek candidate for the dubious honour by 2,000 years. *Haaretz*, 6 June 2021.





# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

263: 5-4-3-2-1

(Always quite liked Manfred Mann – or was I just Blinded By The Light..?)

“In the highest of mathematics, final, sacred mathematics, can this next to the simplest problem in so-called mathematical astronomy be solved?” – Fort, *Books*, p322.

“Every mathematics master dreads the day when he will have to explain the Theorem of Pythagoras” – HF Ellis, *The World of AJ Wentworth, BA* (Penguin, 1964, p18).

Seems natural to kick off with Pythagoras (FT272:17). Ellis has a delightful scene of hapless Wentworth trying to explain (as we called it) the square on the hippopotamus to his refractory class, one of whom interjects: “Sir, it would be a pretty good fluke if a triangle had squares on all its three sides at once, wouldn’t it, sir?”

The Babylonians had in fact cracked this theorem much earlier. Nor was Pythagoras the first theorem-monger. Pre-Socratic Thales had been there first. Perhaps mulling over them caused his absent-mindedly falling into a well.

Another Pythagorean brainchild was his Tetractys of the Decad, a triangular figure comprising 10 points in four rows, key element of the secret worship of his beliefs. It is supposedly the basis of football’s ‘Christmas Tree’ players’ formations. Since Pythagoras believed in soul migrations, we should seek out his latest reincarnation and appoint him England manager, though given his famous taboo on beans, that wouldn’t have sat well with Alan Shearer.

“Children who need to count and multiply are being taught anti-racist mathematics, whatever that may be” – Mrs Thatcher, 1987 Conference Speech. Having glanced at many relevant websites, like Maggie I am none the wiser. This seems not an ancient nonsense.

Babylonians and Egyptians were the mathematical trailblazers – our word, incidentally, comes from Greek *Mathema* = Basic Knowledge. Babylonians mastered every branch. Their numerals were key to a murder-mystery code in *The Bridge* (third season), identified by detective Saga Noren.

Euclid said, “There is no royal road to geometry.” The entrance logo to Plato’s Academy supposedly warned “Let no one who cannot do geometry enter” – that would have let me out.

Archimedes is best remembered for his Screw and bath-tub discovery of Specific Gravity – actually anticipated by Æsop, Fable 390 – running out naked

shouting EUREKA! More impressive is his calculation of how many grains of sand comprise the Universe: his  $10^{63}$  (cf. Eddington’s 1938 announcement of  $10^{80}$ .)

Euclid was the ‘Father of Geometry’. Likewise, Diophantus ‘Father of Algebra’. Book 14 of the *Greek Anthology* consists of poetic mathematical problems, all soluble by algebra. They include (no126) the tombstone biography of Diophantus, riddlingly expressed.

Book 12, an assembly of pæderastic poems, of the same Anthology includes (no12) the “chance discovery” that Greek words for anus and gold have identical numerical value. This is an erotic example of the popular Greek notion of Isopsephy (akin to Hebrew Gematria). Such formulations

are frequent in lovelorn Pompeian graffiti, e.g. “I love her whose

name is 545” – hardly the most romantic of declarations.

Suetonius (*Nero*, ch39 para2) reports this more elaborate Roman graffito, in Greek:

*Nero, Orestes, Alcmæon their mothers slew. A calculation new. Nero his mother slew.*

The Greek numerical value of

Nero’s name equalled those in the rest of the sentence, hence this equation: Nero the matricide. This leads into the more famous Nero = the Beast 666, from the NT Revelation, albeit this is now disputed, with other candidates proposed – see the many relevant websites, though its fearfulness is still called Hexakosioihexekontahexaphobia.

Roman numerology took generally predictable routes. Odd numbers were thought stronger than even ones, since you can’t divide them out into nothing. I can’t say into Zero, since neither Greeks nor Romans ever came up with that concept. I gather (second hand) that credit is divided between Indians and Mayans – wonder what a Græco-Roman roulette wheel would have looked like?

There were lucky and unlucky numbers. 3 and 7 were deemed especially propitious. Contrariwise, 63 was (in terms of one’s age) feared as potentially lethal: Cicero (e.g.) was that age when murdered – makes me think of the Beatles’ “When I’m 64”.

Some create ancient-modern links. We all know about Triskaidekaphobia (fear of 13), Christianly inspired by The Last Supper. Many Italians are wary of Friday the 17th, because XVII can mutate into VIXI = I Have Lived. Above all, that most fortune of numerals, the 23 Enigma, has Roman roots.

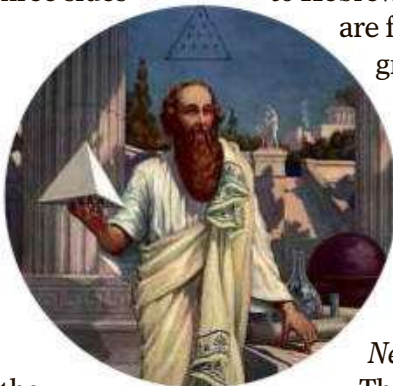
Cæsar (e.g.) was killed by 23 dagger blows. Roman generals displaying their patriotic scars usually had the same – examples in Pliny, *Natural History*, bk7 ch28 para104. In his article “Displaying Honourable Scars: A Roman Gimmick,” *Acta Classica* 42 (1999), p81 n11, Richard Evans writes: “The number twenty-three occurs often. Either then a *topos* or of some obscure mystical significance”.

Horace (*Epistles*, bk2 no2 v45) unconcernedly recalls schoolboy geometry. Augustine (*Confessions*, bk1 ch13) shudderingly recollects chanting “that loathsome jingle” of *unum et unum faciunt duo; duo et duo faciunt quattuor* (One and One make Two; Two and Two make Four). You have to admire any Greek or Roman who could cope with their numerical systems. The Greek one comprised intricate combinations of letters and digits. As for the Roman, everybody knows its signs – V, X, L, C, D, M – but how many of us could (say) multiply XCIXLVIII by DXXVI?

The most exotic ancient mathematician was Hypatia (c. 350-415), daughter of Theon, whose mathematical works she edited; cf. Edward J Watt’s 2017 biography. She was the leading exponent of Neo-Platonism at Alexandria. Her stunning beauty provoked intense passion in a student. To stop his stalking, she confronted him, pulled up her clothes to reveal blood-stained sanitary towels (some claim she invented these; cf. Danuta Shanzer’s article, *Rivista di Filologia* 113, 1985, 61-6), and said, “This is what you are in love with, and it isn’t pretty” – an anecdote worthy of the modern feminist journal that bears her name. A more decorous version said she cured him with music. Not clear how this was possible in a world without ghetto blasters – a modern transplant might suggest the soundtrack from *There Will Be Blood*.

In 415, the aging Hypatia was brutally lynched by a gang of monks, with Bishop Cyril either conniving or winking at this. Gibbon conflated the several contemporary accounts into this characteristic purple passage: “On a fatal day, in the holy season of Lent, Hypatia was torn from her chariot, stripped naked, dragged to the church, and inhumanely butchered by Peter the Reader and a troop of savage and merciless fanatics: her flesh was scraped from her bones with sharp oyster-shells, and her quivering limbs were delivered to the flames.”

“Mathematicians are incurable. They are inert to the new, because the new is a surprise, and mathematics concerns itself with the expected” – Fort, p827.







# Lightning attractors

DAVID HAMBLING disentangles science from superstition in the world's lightning lore

Many things attract lightning, at least according to popular folklore. Small metal items have often been considered dangerous, along with mirrors, and certain types of tree. Some of these beliefs turn out to have a basis in science, while others are the result of misinterpretation or magical thinking.

The belief in mirrors as lightning attractors appears in different forms in Ireland, Italy, the Caribbean, Latin America and part of Asia. One writer in El Salvador watched her sister taking down all the mirrors at the first sound of thunder. South Africa has an unusually high rate of mortality from lightning, estimated to be 100 times greater than the UK and perhaps more. Older people from all cultural groups in South Africa tend to cover mirrors during a storm. A recent questionnaire asked first year mining students, a group expected to have a good level of education, whether mirrors attract lightning; 65 per cent thought they did. A notable exception is Bangladesh, where mirrors are thought to *repel* lightning.

Covering mirrors may have originated as a safety measure. If lightning strikes a house, or nearby, glass might shatter and a cloth over a mirror will catch dangerous fragments. However, many have a specific belief that a mirror attracts and reflects lightning back into a room, suggesting that the belief is grounded in superstition.

Trees are often struck by lightning, and some are more likely to be hit than others. In England, an old rhyme cautions: "Beware of an oak, it draws the stroke; avoid an ash, it courts the flash; creep under the thorn, it can save you from harm."

There is some truth to this, but it is not due to the inherent properties of particular tree species. Lightning occurs when highly charged clouds draw an electrical response from the ground below. The opposite charge will tend to gather on the points closest to the clouds, which includes the tops of trees. 'Leaders' of charged gas stretch out both upwards and downwards, and when they connect and make a circuit, lightning forms.

This means that the tallest object in an area is the most likely to be struck. Oak and ash are two of the tallest native tree species in England, and so are naturally struck more often than others. A mature oak is typically 20m (66ft) high, with some reaching to 40m (132ft) or more. Such landmarks can bear the scars of several lightning strikes.



By contrast the hawthorn, the thorn under which the listener is invited to creep, rarely attains a height of more than 10m (33ft) and is unlikely to be the tallest tree in mixed forest.

In South Africa, some trees are believed to attract lightning while others repel it. The Syringa tree, a type of lilac, is believed to be so dangerous that some farmers will cut down every one on their property. Dr Ann Cameron of the University of Witwatersrand has suggested that the aromatic oils exuded by some trees may make the air more conductive and provide a preferred path for lightning. It is an intriguing theory, but further practical research is needed to establish whether it is valid.

Folklore gets it right about trees being unsafe shelters in thunderstorms. An effect known as sideflash can be lethal to someone several metres away from a tree. Sideflash occurs when the lightning conducted down the tree can go to earth with less resistance by jumping the gap between the tree and a person and earthing through them. Such incidents can kill several people at once.

It is also commonly believed that small metallic objects attract lightning. These can

include things like keys, jewellery and mobile phones. Signs on the Great Wall in China warn against the risk of carrying phones, and there was considerable media coverage when a girl was killed by lightning in a London Park in 2006 while talking on her phone. "Next time you find yourself talking on your mobile phone in the middle of a thunderstorm you may want to cut the conversation short," started one BBC News story.

Since ancient times, lightning victims have been found with metal objects on them melted or vaporised – and in recent years this has included phones, MP3 players and underwiring in bras. This has been misinterpreted as meaning that the object drew the lightning. A metal object will conduct electricity and heat up rapidly: this can lead to metallisation, where the metal vapour leaves marks around where the object was. The hot metal will leave serious burns and make injuries more severe. But this does not mean it attracts lightning in the first place.

"Cell phones, small metal items, jewellery, etc., do not attract lightning. Nothing attracts lightning," said John Jensenius, a NOAA National Weather

Service lightning expert in a statement put out in response to lightning myths. "People are struck because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. The wrong place is anywhere outside. The wrong time is anytime a thunderstorm is nearby."

However, the Met Office may be adding to the confusion by advising people on its official lightning safety page to "be aware of metal objects that can conduct or attract lightning, including golf clubs, golf buggies, fishing rods, umbrellas..."

While the idea that golfers are natural lightning magnets is intuitively appealing as they are standing in the open and carrying a long metal object, it turns out not to be quite accurate. A study of lightning casualties in the US from 2006-2019 found that anglers suffered four times as many fatalities as golfers. In fact, more soccer players were killed than golfers – 12 to 10.

Perhaps the most conspicuous finding of the study was that 90 per cent of lightning deaths were male, which is explicable in terms of who is most likely to be outdoors in stormy weather. We might wonder though why folklore, which is so emphatic about mirrors, does not tell us why men are at such magnified risk of being struck down.



# JAMIE MOLLART KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD

THE EARTH'S RESOURCES ARE DWINDLING. THE SOLUTION IS THE SLEEP.

INSIDE A HIBERNATING CITY, BEN STRUGGLES WITH HIS LIMITED WAKING TIME AND THE DISEASE STEALING HIS WIFE FROM HIM. WATCHING OVER THE SLEEPERS, LONELY PERUZZI CRAVES THE FAMILY HE NEVER KNEW.

EVERYWHERE, DISSATISFACTION IS GROWING.

THE CITY IS ABOUT TO WAKE.



'THIS IS A FRIGHTENING, THOUGHTFUL VISION EXPLORING WHERE POWER LIES WHEN EVEN THE ACT OF BEING AWAKE IS REVOLUTIONARY'.

**ALIYA WHITELEY**, SHORTLISTED FOR THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD

'I WOULD LIKE TO SEE *KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* MADE INTO A 'CLI-FI' FILM, MARKED AS BOTH A CAUTIONARY TALE AND SATIRE'.

**JULIET BLAXLAND**, SHORTLISTED FOR THE WAINWRIGHT PRIZE

'A HAUNTING VISION OF THE NEAR-FUTURE WITH EXPERT WORLD-BUILDING AND RICH COMPLEX CHARACTERS, *KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* KEPT ME GRIPPED FROM BEGINNING TO END'.

**TEMI OH**, WINNER OF THE ALEX AWARD

'MOLLART'S INTRIGUING AND TIMELY PREMISE IS EXECUTED WITH VERVE - *KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* IS FILMIC IN ITS SCOPE'.

**ALISON MOORE**, SHORTLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE

'*KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* INTRIGUED ME WITH ITS TITLE AND HAD ME ON PAGE ONE. MOLLART'S DYSTOPIAN VISION IS AS DISTURBING AS IT IS BRILLIANT'.

**GILES KRISTIAN**, SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LANCELOT*

**AVAILABLE NOW**  
ON AMAZON, WATERSTONES AND ALL GOOD BOOKSHOPS

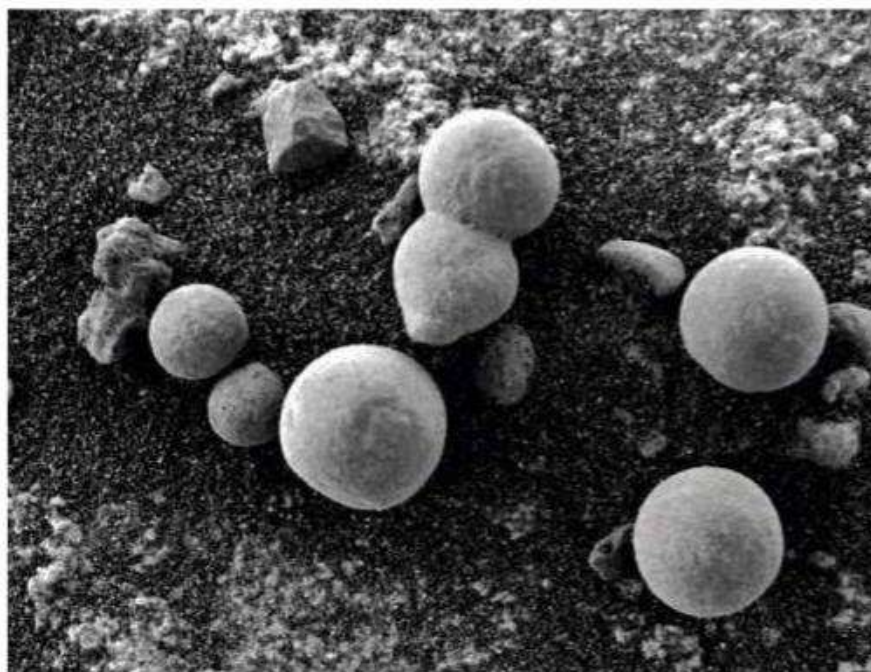


# LIFE, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT...

Tardigrades, rotifers and fungi from outer space

## MUSHROOMS ON MARS

It is rare that a scientific paper makes tabloid headlines, but in May a paper from the peer reviewed journal *Advances in Microbiology* claiming the discovery of fungi growing on Mars did just that. Despite first appearances, this was not the latest revelation from the NASA Perseverance rover currently searching for life on Mars, but the result of analysis of publicly available images taken by the Opportunity rover that was operational from 2003 to 2018. The paper's authors, Rhawn Gabriel Joseph, an independent researcher, Dr Xinli Wei, of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and Dr Rudolph Schild from Harvard-Smithsonian scrutinised a sequence of photographs the rover had taken of small spherical structures on Mars's surface and came to the conclusion that the changes they observed were indicative of the growth cycle of fungi and that the objects' morphology was also consistent with that of fungi. In their paper "Fungi on Mars? Evidence of Growth and Behavior From Sequential Images" (which can be found on Researchgate: <https://bit.ly/3fgxV5y>) they claim that the sequential photos show puffball-like fungi emerging from the Martian soil, and that after they are obliterated by the rover wheels they can be seen to grow back. The key sequence allegedly shows nine spheres increasing in size, and an additional 12 spheres emerging from beneath the soil, over a three-day period, in some cases showing surface features similar to those seen on terrestrial puffballs, and that they "expand in size, or conversely, change shape, move to new locations, and/or wane in size and nearly disappear". The authors also make wider claims that other photos may show massive colonies of black mould and other fungal species growing across the planet. If true, this would be very impressive, but, as the authors admit, while they see this



*Joseph has form when it comes to publishing about Martian fungi*



evidence as strongly indicative of life, it will need more research to conclusively prove that life is present, demonstrating that the structures are actually made of organic material.

However, despite the media feeding frenzy, the claim swiftly began to unravel. NASA poured cold water on the idea, with Andrew Good, a spokesman for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, stating: "Needless to say, no, this is not evidence of fungi on Mars." Other planetary scientists pointed out that the nature

and origin of the alleged fungal structures was already well known. These structures, known as "blueberries", were analysed by the Opportunity rover when they were found and determined to be composed of the iron oxide hematite, and their appearance and disappearance was the result of wind blowing the Martian soil about. A further problem is that fungi need oxygen and water to grow, and neither are abundant on Mars; plus fungi rely on decaying organic matter for nutrients, and Mars has even less of that.

The journal that published the paper, while peer reviewed, is an obscure one – a discovery as fundamental as life on Mars would normally be expected to be showcased in *Nature* or *Science*. *Advances in Microbiology* is produced by a small Chinese publisher and has previously been caught out for republishing papers that had appeared in other journals; it has been accused of being a predatory publisher that charged scientists fees to print their papers without checking their quality. The lead author, Rhawn Gabriel Joseph, is also a somewhat surprising character to be publishing on astrobiology; he is a neuroscientist who has been dubbed "The Space Tiger King" for the photos on his website, [brainmind.com](http://brainmind.com), showing him posing in an open shirt,

LEFT: Martian mushrooms – or hematite "blueberries"? BELOW LEFT: Rhawn Gabriel Joseph – who has been dubbed "The Space Tiger King" – with one of his female friends.

wearing shades against a tacky space backdrop, and cavorting with various young women. He also looks suspiciously youthful in these pictures for someone whose scientific credentials rest on work on neuroplasticity done in the 1970s.

Joseph has form when it comes to publishing about Martian fungi – he had a peer-reviewed paper on the topic published in *Astrophysics & Space Science* in 2019, which was later retracted by the journal, which stated that "the article proffers insufficient critical assessment of the material presented and literature cited and fails to provide a solid underpinning for the speculative statements made in the article which invalidates the conclusions drawn." In his book *Mars: Evidence for Life* Joseph claims that as well as fungi, he has also identified "anomalies" photographed by NASA that "resemble fossilized creatures as well as skulls, bones, skeletal remains suggestive of complex and intelligent life, including debris fields which appear to be strewn with wreckage, tools, and the remains of Martians or other aliens." As a result, it looks like the fungi furore is just the latest example of a combination of pareidolia (seeing patterns when there are none) and wishful thinking that led to the Cydonia Face as well as a fish, a cannonball, a thigh bone and a squirrel being "found" on photos from the planet; the only difference is that Joseph had the skills and residual scientific credibility to wangle a journal publication for his find.

NASA does, in fact, have a significant interest in fungi on Mars, just not ones native to the planet. NASA's Innovative Advanced Concepts (NIAC) programme, intended to fund highly speculative but potentially





**ABOVE LEFT:** Tardigrades could potentially survive a journey across space. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The bdelloid rotifer, able to revive and reproduce after being frozen for 24,000 years.

useful space-related research, has funded a project proposed by synthetic biologist Lynn Rothschild to investigate the possible use of fungi to build habitats and space infrastructure for Mars. She is exploring whether it would be possible to grow fungal strands on waste products in space, using them to fill moulds to create things like bricks that could then be used to construct buildings. NASA are also concerned about the potential for space missions to be derailed by the wrong kind of fungi getting off-planet. Experiments that involved firing it into the stratosphere where the atmosphere is similar to that on Mars have shown that toxic black mould fungus could survive in Martian conditions for long enough to pose a threat to astronaut health. Its presence in contaminated buildings on Earth is known to lead to skin rashes, headaches, dizziness and chronic fatigue. This could cause severe problems if it took hold in the confined spaces in which future Mars colonists are expected to live. *sciencealert*, 29 Mar 2019; *businessinsider.in*, 22 Feb; *popularmechanics.com*, 7 May; *Dailystar.co.uk*, 8 May; *cnet.com*, 8 May; *thesun.co.uk*, 11 May; *space.com*, 21 May; *Dailymail.co.uk*, 24 May 2021.

## PIGS FROM A GUN

Further evidence of the startling indestructibility of tardigrades (FT385:9, 395:19) has been obtained by researchers at the University of Kent. The micro-

scopic invertebrates, also known as water bears or moss piglets, have a track record of being able to survive conditions far beyond those that would kill most living things, surviving zero oxygen, massive pressures, cosmic radiation, high vacuums and even boiling, which they do by desiccating and retreating into a barrel-like structure known as a “tun”.

As part of their research into the constraints on how and where extraterrestrial life might be found in the Solar System, astrochemist Alejandra Traspas and astrophysicist Mark Burchell used tardigrades to explore how well living things survive violent impacts. To do this they loaded tardigrades frozen into

the tun state into a specialised gun that could fire projectiles at velocities of up to 8km (5 miles) a second. Tardigrades fired at 825m (2,707ft) a second survived and recovered quickly, but at 901m (2,956ft) a second the result was “tardigrade jam”.

This has implications for the panspermia idea (FT277:32-37, 385:14), which proposes that life can spread from world to world by asteroids and comets that collide with planets, and that such impacts on life-containing planets could blow chunks of life-containing debris into space, where it might then fall onto another planet or moon. The impact tardigrades survived is within the range at which rocks ejected

from the Earth hit the Moon, so tardigrade-like organisms could potentially spread across a solar system by hitching a ride on impact debris blown off their home planet. *Sciencealert.com*, 19 May 2021.

## UNFEASIBLY LONG-LIVED ORGANISM

Not to be outdone by tardigrades, another tough microscopic multicellular organism, the bdelloid rotifer, has been shown to be able to revive and reproduce after 24,000 years frozen in the Siberian permafrost. Also known to be highly resistant to radiation, low oxygen and starvation, the rotifers, which thrive in similar locations to tardigrades – moss, soil, ponds and streams – are biological curiosities as they seem to have given up sex. All individuals are female and lay eggs that hatch into exact clones of their parent. Previous research had shown they could survive freezing for up to 10 years, but this new discovery suggests they have the potential to last almost indefinitely in deep freeze.

“The takeaway is that a multicellular organism can be frozen and stored as such for thousands of years and then return back to life – a dream of many fiction writers,” Said Stas Malavin, of Russia’s Institute of Physicochemical and Biological Problems in Soil Science. Researchers are now going to look into how the rotifers achieve this feat. *BBC News*, 8 June 2021.

## WRONG SCIENCE IS MORE POPULAR

According to a University of California, San Diego, study, scientific papers that are wrong are more likely to be read and cited in other papers than those that are correct. They looked at papers published in leading psychology, economic and nature/science journals to see how many were successfully repeated to verify the results and found that only 39 per cent of 100 psychology papers were successfully replicated. In economics, the replication rate was 61 per cent, and 62 per cent among nature/science studies. What they also discovered was that the ‘wrong’ papers got a lot of attention at the time of publication, with nature/science papers that could not be verified getting cited 300 times more than the verified ones. They concluded that this is probably because journals are likely to favour unverified studies if they have eye-catching, media friendly results. These generate a lot of interest when they appear but follow-up studies showing they are not verifiable do not get the same attention. As a result, papers where the science cannot be verified often continue to be cited by other researchers for years after their results have been shown to be impossible to repeat and so are likely to be wrong. [UPI] 25 May 2021.





**KARL SHUKER** explores the possible identity of a Swedish monster, plus a brand new bird



ABOVE LEFT: Örebro Castle in Sweden, where Sofia Lindholm filmed the 'monster' (below). ABOVE RIGHT: New Guinea's new bird – the satin berrypicker.

## CATFISH AT THE CASTLE?

In July 2021, courtesy of longstanding cryptozoological friend and artist Richard Svensson from Sweden, I learnt of a fascinating water monster that had hitherto received little if any attention outside that country, but which had lately made headlines there again. I am paraphrasing Richard's detailed account as follows. The aquatic cryptid in question was sighted in the small Svartån river that passes through the city of Örebro, southeastern Sweden. The river runs into and out of the moat encircling Örebro Castle (dating back to mediæval times), so people have observed this creature both in the moat and in the river. The river also goes into a lake, where, according to tradition, a 30ft (9m) monster has been seen since the 1600s. It is said to hide in hollows under the castle from time to time. A few years ago, it was seen catching and eating a duck in the moat. Back then, it was only described as having a broad, dark head with a huge mouth. Apparently, however, it has returned for an encore performance this year. A woman named Sofia Lindholm on her way to work stopped by the river and filmed the 'monster' snaking its way just below the surface of the water. She was surprised to be struck by a feeling of extreme unease, but stayed to film the creature for as long as it was visible. (I am including at the end of this report a link to her video as featured in a Swedish TV news report). The best guess among Swedish wildlife experts to date is that it is a giant European wels catfish, *Silurus glanis*, a species believed to attain a total length of up to 10ft (3m) (but most do not exceed 6.5ft/2m), although unconfirmed mega-specimens of up to 16.5ft (5m)



long have also been claimed, but as yet remain unproven. Significantly, the wels is indeed native to this region of Sweden. Moreover, as it is a popular species for anglers to catch, it has been introduced into various freshwater locations beyond its native range, so it is not impossible that the wels has been introduced into lakes and rivers elsewhere in Sweden, which might explain various other freshwater monster sightings in this country. Not everyone favours a wels identity for the object in Lindholm's video, however, with some preferring an eel, whereas certain others do not even deem it to be a living entity, but merely a rope or some other inanimate object, possibly being towed by a boat. Interestingly, it is undulating horizontally while moving through the water, which is the manner in which fishes (and also snakes) do typically swim; aquatic mammals, conversely, swim via vertical undulations. <https://bit.ly/3ifdwzg>; Richard Svensson, pers. comms, 19 July 2021.

## NEW BIRD IN NEW GUINEA

In June 2021, a multi-national team of scientists headed by Dr Borja Milá from Spain's National Museum of Natural Sciences, at the Spanish National Research Council, formally described and named in the ornithological journal *Ibis* a new species of songbird from New Guinea. Dubbed the satin berrypecker *Melanocharis citreola* (aka the satin picabaya), it is a particularly significant discovery because it belongs to a taxonomic bird family endemic to New Guinea, i.e. found nowhere else. Melanocharitidae, containing the berrypeckers and the longbills, is an old, well-established, discrete family of small

perching birds that originated around 28 million years ago during the Oligocene Epoch. Native to the cloud forest in the remote Kumawa Mountains (part of the unique Bird's Head Isthmus) of western New Guinea (West Papua province, Indonesia), it first came to the team's attention during a short field expedition there spanning 12-18 November 2014, when, at an altitude above sea-level of 1,100-1,200m (3,600-4,000ft), a single male specimen was sighted, collected, and recognised to be seemingly distinct from all five of the berrypecker species already known. Three more specimens (again all males; the female form has yet to be seen and described) were collected during a longer, return expedition there spanning 17 October-13 November 2017. Morphological and genetic comparisons subsequently confirmed that the collected individuals did indeed constitute a species new to science, and actually very distinct genetically from all of the other berrypecker species. A small but handsome species, the satin berrypecker sports iridescent blue-black upperparts, but what distinguishes it outwardly from its five fellow *Melanocharis* species are its satin-white underparts, washed lemon-yellow, and also the white edging to its outermost pair of retrices (tail feathers). Worth noting is that the satin berrypecker is only the second undisputed new species of bird to have been discovered anywhere in New Guinea since 1939 – the first was the wattled smoky honeyeater *Mellipotes carolæ*, which was discovered in December 2005 during an expedition to the remote montane forests of Western New Guinea's Foja Mountains, and formally described in 2007. [www.sci-news.com/biology/satin-berrypecker-melanocharis-citreola-09758.html](http://www.sci-news.com/biology/satin-berrypecker-melanocharis-citreola-09758.html); <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ibi.12981#>.





# ANIMAL ROUND-UP

Vanishing giant rabbit, Oxford snake scare, Sunderland sheep mystery and a snail egg beach invasion...



**ABOVE LEFT:** Guinness World Record holder Annette Winters (“oldest topless model”) with fellow Guinness star Darius (“longest rabbit”) in happier times. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The beach at Mar del Plata, Argentina, covered with thousands of sea snail eggs in April. **BELOW:** Amelia Drewitt with the five-foot length of snake skin she found in Headington.

## GIANT BUNNY THEFT

Darius, a continental giant rabbit, was stolen from his enclosure in the village of Stoulton, Worcestershire, on 10 April. At 4ft 2in (129cm) long and almost three stone (19kg) in weight, Darius is the Guinness World Records holder for the longest rabbit, a record previously held by his mother, Alice. Initially, West Mercia police suspected that Darius had been stolen for ransom as at 12 years old, he is too old for breeding, but no demand has been received.

Darius’s owner, Annette Edwards, is herself a Guinness World Records holder as the oldest topless model. She is a former Miss Birmingham and Playboy model who has spent £18,000 on plastic surgery to make herself look like the cartoon character Jessica Rabbit and has been a professional giant continental rabbit breeder since 2004, owning more than 100 of the animals over the years. Distraught at Darius’s theft, she offered a reward of £1,000 for his safe return and engaged professional pet detective Robert Kenny to investigate. Kenny said: “The only way that this can be sold is if it goes out of the UK...

so it’s of paramount importance that borders are closed [to stop] the opportunity for this animal to be moved.” Despite a doubling of the reward money, no trace has been found of the rabbit. *Guardian*, 12+14 April; *D. Mail*, 13 April 2021.

## SNAIL EGG INVASION

The beach at Mar del Plata, 250 miles (400km) south of Buenos Aires in Argentina, has been inundated with thousands of pearlescent orbs. These turned out to be eggs from the sea snail *Adelomelon brasiliiana*, which lives off the coast of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina and can grow up to eight inches (20cm) in length. The pearly orbs themselves are actually ‘ovicapsules’, made up of two concentric egg capsules with the inner one containing multiple snail embryos. They hatch from the inner capsule and continue to grow in the outer one until they are ready to crawl out. Marine biologist, Alejandro Saubidet said that the snails are usually found in the deep sea; while their eggs are often found on the coast, brought to the surface by tides or the wind, it is very unusual to see them at this density. *BoingBoing.net*, *Nerdist.com*, 29 April 2021.



## BOA ON THE LOOSE

Amelia Drewitt, seven, found this 5ft (1.5m) chunk of skin shed by a boa constrictor in a bramble bush under a bridge beside a busy road in Headington, a suburb of Oxford, while out walking with her grandfather on 30 October 2020. At the time of the news reports, the skin was hanging up

in her grandparents’ house about 100m (290ft) from where it was found. The snake could be a good deal longer than 5ft, as the skin is incomplete. Boa constrictors are not venomous but can kill small animals by squeezing them to death. They can be kept without a licence. *Metro*, *D.Star*, 4 Nov 2020.

## TELEPORTING LAMBS

Over a period of a fortnight in late May, three families in Sunderland woke to find that lambs had appeared in their gardens overnight. Amy Scollen, 28, discovered a lamb in her garden in Ryhope on 13 May, which she described as a “very weird morning”. She said: “I opened the door to grab the milk and it was staring me in the face.” There were two more almost identical incidents over the next two weeks. Heather Wade, an RSPCA rescue officer, said: “I know the lambs could not have wandered into the gardens, as they were enclosed, so it suggests someone has deliberately done this... We are not sure where they have come from as there are no nearby farms, so we could not reunite them with their mum and they are now being hand-reared by a specialist.” *Guardian*, 5 June 2021.



# THE C NSPIRASPHERE

Twenty years ago the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City announced the dawning of a strange new world. **NOEL ROONEY** revisits the Ground Zero of 21st century conspiracy theory.

## TRAGEDY AND ILLUSION

*"It feels like fifty years ago, and then it feels like yesterday"*

– FDNY Assistant Chief  
Salvatore Cassano

The events of 9/11, 20 years ago, are vividly fresh in my mind; for many people of my generation, this was our JFK moment, the event that separated before and after. I recall a whole raft of feelings, but three stand out now.

First, of course, was the visceral horror of it all; television and the Internet had brought all sorts of terrible events into our living rooms – the US embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya, the worst atrocities of the war in the former Yugoslavia, natural disasters – but this was different. This was New York. This was somehow in our own backyard, even if we lived in Europe. There was a real sense that people we knew, or people who knew people we knew, could be in those towers. This was in some sense us. And it was coming to us live on TV.

Second was the eerie sensation that I was witnessing a spectacle of terrible beauty. The symmetry and symbolism of it, the choreography of the event, had a cruel, but palpable, aesthetic. The two planes careened inexorably into the two towers; the towers collapsed in an apocalypse of dust and debris. Here were the ithyphallic icons of rampant capitalism crumbling before our eyes, brought to earth by commercial aircraft, another icon of modern technology and the illusion of limitless freedom. We were being given a stark warning in a script that, if only we could read it, would reveal the darkest secrets of our culture.

The third feeling was the most difficult to articulate at the time, but is perhaps the most important for what follows. The real tragedy, unravelling in real time on live



ABOVE: Smoke pours from the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001.

## *The scene was set for a battle of conflicting narratives*

TV, carried an equally tangible sense of unreality, of fiction; this was horrible, but it was also Hollywood. The story of Flight 93, the only plane that failed to reach its target, only added to the action movie feel; heroic passengers foiling the terrorists at the expense of their own lives, striking a blow for freedom, for the little guy.

Within minutes of the first plane striking the WTC, all TV channels were monopolised by the unfolding events, and this was to spawn a raft of unintended consequences. In the confusion, all sorts of strange reports were clutched at by TV crews desperate to be the first to the big reveal. The US security apparatus sprang into action very quickly to try and control the narrative,

but they were constantly contradicted and blindsided by news from reporters and witnesses on the ground.

There were explosions in the basements of the buildings, before the planes struck. More explosions preceded the collapse of the towers. Israeli art students were dancing in celebration as they watched the towers fall. A truck loaded with explosives had been apprehended near Brooklyn Bridge. There were more hijacked planes in the air. The litany of anomalous reports, many of them no doubt the panicked confabulations of people too scared to think straight, permeated the official narrative from the very beginning.

Then, as the events unfolded through the day, a pivotal event – unnoticed or forgotten by many – occurred. A third skyscraper, WTC7, collapsed. It had not been struck by a plane, but it had suffered some damage from the collapse of the neighbouring towers. The CIA's New York offices, FEMA,

the SEC, the New York mayor's command post, were all housed in Building 7. Strangest of all, the BBC appeared to report the building's collapse some 20-odd minutes *before* it actually happened (you can still find the footage online, of reporter Jane Standley announcing the news, Building 7 clearly visible, and clearly still standing, in the background).

The scene was set for a titanic battle of conflicting narratives. The battle is still being waged today, by one side at least. The avalanche of conspiracy theories about 9/11 began to circulate within hours of the first act of the tragedy unfolding. This was (hard to imagine now) before the days of social media, but the Internet was alive with questions, with rumours, with theories, right from the start. While the US, and much of the world, was still numb with shock, inquiring minds were sifting and filtering the torrent of strange stories and measuring them against the rapidly solidifying official narrative, which by now had a



principal villain, and a cast of fanatical accomplices, already in place.

It is worth noting that both the official narrative and the alternative account promoted by the Truthers are conspiracy theories. To date, the FBI, which has indicted Osama bin Laden on a number of counts, has never done so in relation to 9/11, and that is, by their own admission, because there is actually no evidence – forensic, documentary or witness testimony – against him. If anything, the Truthers have presented more concrete evidence (whether or not one agrees with it) than the US government and its many three-letter agencies.

It would take a book to enumerate the points of contention between the two camps, and there are hundreds out there (some of them really out there) for those who are interested. I want to focus on some broader themes here. What does 9/11 tell us about the nature of conspiracy theory, and of those who see it as a threat to democracy? Has conspiracy theory changed since that terrible event and, if so, was 9/11 responsible for those changes? And have the very real inconsistencies in the official narrative caught the attention of commentators who are not conspiracy theorists?

There has been a lot of talk in academic circles about the ‘new’ conspiracy theory. The suggestion is that the Internet, social media, and perhaps the increasingly adversarial nature of politics in the US, has created the conditions for a new way of doing conspiracy theory; Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, authors of *A Lot of People are Saying*, have characterised this variant on the conspiracist standpoint as “conspiracy without the theory”.

If that is the salient feature, then clearly the 9/11 truth movement does not fit the bill. The amount of serious research, often carried out by experts in various fields – architects, engineers, physicists, pilots and aeronautics experts, economists and political analysts – is staggering. The sheer number of individuals who have chosen to stick



ABOVE: Protesters demanding an investigation of 9/11 at an anti-war protest parade in Los Angeles 2007.

their necks out and say that something is deeply wrong with the official narrative, people with longstanding careers in professional occupations or the military, speaks to a collective doubt that is anything but frivolous. The volume of dissenting evidence amassed by these investigators of 9/11 probably outstrips the material gathered by investigators of the JFK assassination, and that is a truly impressive claim; it certainly far outweighs the – itself voluminous – material in support of the orthodox narrative. So perhaps we can say that the 9/11 truth movement is the last of the ‘old’ conspiracy theories; a concerted attempt by people with deadly serious concerns, and the research and analytical skills to pursue them, to get at a truth about 9/11 that they feel is missing and needs to be told.

Incidentally, there are many, this writer included, who do not think there is any ‘new’ form of conspiracy theory. Knee-jerk dissident responses (and, more prosaically, gossip) are as old as history, and to date none has been shown to have threatened or assaulted a political system. The phenomenon commentators such as Muirhead and Rosenblum examine says a great deal more about the insidious nature of social media than it does about the Conspirasphere.

My third question leads to some curious developments in the conflict of narratives. I have spent some time searching academic literature to see if there is evidence that the issues raised by Truthers are

getting any kind of traction among those who might see themselves as arbiters of ‘serious’ debate. I found a few examples of papers and lectures tentatively suggesting that 9/11, and the questions that still surround it, are perhaps worthy of, or even in need of, academic examination (this assuming, as I suspect many in the Establishment do, that the work done by even the most qualified Truthers does not count); some cautious suggestions that the discipline of International Relations ought to be treating the controversy seriously, and at least one lecture where the speaker casts serious doubt on the coherence (and thus by implication the veracity) of official explanations of the Building 7 collapse. This is by no means a big shift in academic perspective, but it is intriguing.

And from the outset, there have been political commentators who, while they may not agree with the evidence presented by the Truthers, have certainly been sceptical of the behaviour of the US administration before, during and after the events of 9/11. The ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (the latter now revealed as another Saigon moment for the US) have produced a slew of political conspiracy theories emanating from people who would not normally be labelled conspiracy theorists.

So there are in a sense two different frameworks for conspiracy theories about 9/11: one concerned with the nuts and bolts of the events, asking the age-old question

– *cui bono?* – and coming up with the answer of an inside job; and one examining the (equally age-old) propensity of powerful people to treat a disaster as an opportunity to implement pre-existing plans. Both continue to engage millions of people, 20 years after the event; and neither can be said to have come to a definitive conclusion.

Personally, I think 9/11 has, more than anything, given further credence (if that were needed) to the idea first proposed by Daniel Boorstin in *The Image*, and since expanded on by writers such as Chris Hedges, Neal Gadler and John Ralston Saul, among others, that we live in an age of illusion. In this case, the illusion is, paradoxically, based largely on a tragic real-world event; but the legacy of 9/11 is one of smoke and mirrors, of rivals struggling for control of a narrative that will likely never be properly told, and which may be of such a high order of strangeness that, if it were, it would not be believed.

Spookiness aside, the legacy of 9/11 may contain another paradox; that the event has become a central motif in the grand narrative of conspiracy theory, at the same time as the guardians of the official narrative, the several governments intimately connected to the tragedy, would very probably like to see it fade decorously into the background of history. In this respect at least, I think the conspiracists are on the winning side.

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# BEARS BEHAVING BADLY | Incidents of ursine unruliness on the increase from Tennessee to the Tatras Mountains

The year of 2021 is turning out to be a vintage one for bear-related mayhem. Probably the most widely reported story in the UK was about two bears that broke out of their enclosure at Whipsnade Zoo, Bedfordshire, in May using a fallen tree. They then attacked a boar in a neighbouring paddock, leading to keepers having to shoot the bears before they were able to get into public areas. Tranquillisers were not used as they take too long to work and so could not be relied on to keep the public safe. Internationally, though, this was just the tip of the iceberg.

Also in May, in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, students from Jefferson County High School had to flee their pool party at the Chalet Village swimming pool when seven black bears decided to join in. In a video, shot by one of the students from a nearby building where they had taken refuge and posted to Facebook, the bears can be seen swimming in the pools, lounging at the poolside and wandering about the grounds.

In California another teen, 17-year-old Hayley Morinico, took a rather more confrontational approach to a bear invasion. Spotting a mother bear and two cubs on the garden wall in a stand-off with the family's four barking dogs, Morinico rushed outside and shoved the bear back off the wall, causing it to flee. Bear experts said Morinico was lucky to be alive. "There is nothing more dangerous than a mother bear with her cubs," said wildlife expert Ron Magill. Fortunately, Morinico ended up with just a sprained finger and a grazed knee as a result of the encounter, and said: "I didn't know I had it in me to be honest... Who in their right mind pushes a bear?"

In June, in Arizona, bears caused disruption on two occasions by climbing electricity poles. In one incident, a bear caused the closure of Highway 191 after climbing a pole and lounging against electric cables while police and Arizona Fish and Game officials tried to coax it down. It eventually climbed down of its own accord and wandered



back off into the wilderness. On the same day, in Willcox, another bear managed to close down the city's electrical grid by climbing an electricity pole and getting tangled in the cables. The power was switched off and a linesman went up in a bucket lift and tried to poke the bear off the pole with an 8ft (2m) fibreglass rod. After grabbing and biting the rod, the bear freed itself and ran off into the desert.

In Coquitlam, Canada, the McQuillan family slept soundly as two juvenile black bears ransacked the family's grey Chevy Tahoe at 3am, despite repeated efforts to contact them by neighbours and police. The bears had managed to open the driver's and rear passenger door and systematically rummaged through the vehicle, which was parked on the McQuillan's drive. Police believed the bears were attracted to food scattered around the child seat in the back of the vehicle by the McQuillan's two-year-old son, Maverick. The animals were scared off by police without hurting anyone, leaving behind a wrecked child seat and a lingering smell of bear, described by Sean McQuillan, once he had finally woken up to survey the damage, as "like much thicker wet-dog smell". "They absolutely used the handle," he said, looking at how the bears had got into the unlocked car. "You can see a paw print on the corner of the driver's side door." Police said they had come across bears getting into cars before but had never seen two doing so at once.

Later in June, though, bears turned out to be far feistier. A

brown bear found its way into Sapporo in northern Japan and roamed the streets for eight hours, attacking a woman in her 80s, a man in his 70s and another in his 40s who suffered serious injuries to his chest, back and limbs. The bear then found its way to the Ground Self-Defence Force's Camp Okadama, where it attacked the soldier on gate duty, leaving him with cuts to his chest and stomach, after which it ran across the camp and into the neighbouring airport, causing flights to be grounded. It then fled into the surrounding forest, where it was shot by local hunters. Sapporo city environmental department said the bear's presence in town was a surprise and officials were investigating how the animal got there.

In the same month, Slovakia recorded its first fatal bear attack in more than a century. The 57-year-old victim went missing after going for a walk in the forest near the village of Liptovska Luzna in the Low Tatras mountains. Matej Bodor, a friend of the unnamed victim, said: "We found him lying on his stomach beside a trail. He had been bitten in his throat... in his belly, in his ribs." Bears are now common in the Slovak mountains, with numbers growing to an estimated 2,760 from a low of around 900 20 years ago. Slovakia's environment ministry said there had been five bear attacks in the last year, none of them fatal, and that officials had taken DNA samples to identify the killer brown bear. June also saw the first bear attack in northern Spain for 30 years. A 75-year-old

LEFT: Black bears enjoy a pool party in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

woman was mauled near Cagnas del Narcea while out walking with friends. The animal hit her in the face with a front claw then tried to drag her away before her companions managed to chase it off. The victim was taken to hospital with facial injuries and a broken pelvis. The mayor said that there hadn't been an attack in the area for many years but that bears were "getting closer".

However, it hasn't all been going the bears' way. In May, environmental groups accused Prince Emanuel von und zu Liechtenstein, a member of Liechtenstein's royal family, of shooting and killing the largest bear in Romania. The prince, who lives in Austria, had been given permission to shoot a female bear that had been causing damage to farms, paying £6,000 for the privilege. Instead, he shot Arthur, a 17-year-old bear that lived deep in the forest and did not go near human habitations. Gabriel Paun of the Romanian environmental organisation said that Arthur was the largest bear in Romania and probably the largest living in the European Union, adding that it was "clear that the prince did not come to solve the problem of the locals but to kill the bear and take home the biggest trophy to hang it on the wall..."

Finally, closer to home, police seeking a man in Derbyshire who was in breach of the conditions of his electronic tag ended up playing "a game of hide and seek" after the suspect ran away from them and locked himself in a house. Officers combed the premises, eventually finding their suspect hiding under a giant teddy bear. The man was arrested, and officers joked on Twitter that the bear remained in custody "for assisting an offender".

*Guardian*, 5 May; *D.Express*, 22 May; *BoingBoing.net*, 27 May; *Sun* 1 June; *Eve. Standard*, 2 June; *dailymail.com*, 2 June; *Newsweek*, 10 June; [AP] 10 June; *BBC News*, 11 June; *cbc.ca/news*, 11 Jun; *Guardian*, 16 June; *Irish Examiner*, 18 June 2021.



# A TRUE STORY OF THE BACKPACKING TRIP FROM **HELL!**

Amazon Reviews

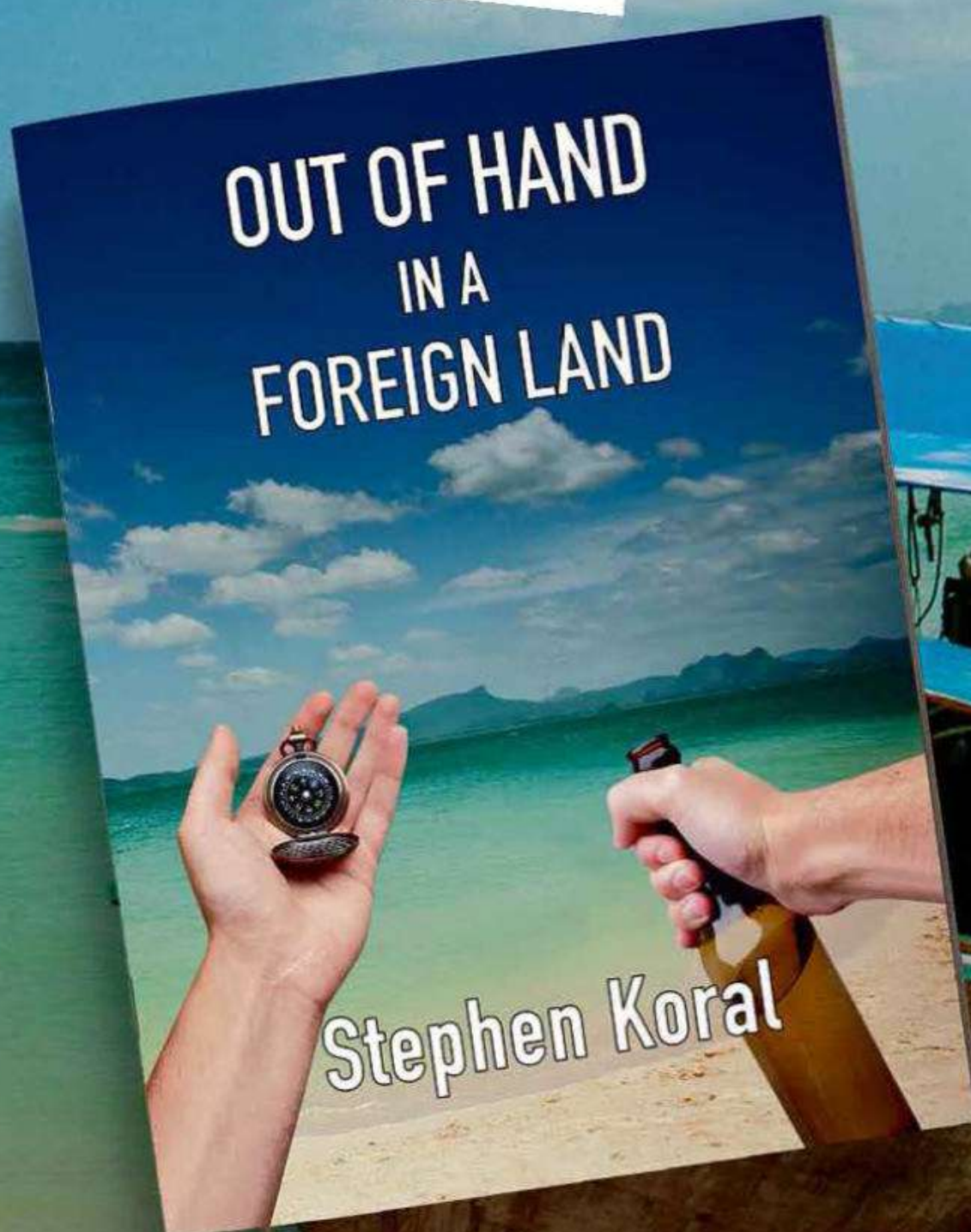
*"precisely the novel we need in this year of isolation and curbed freedoms"*

*"Very funny and dark"*

*"Not your average travel book, far more than that"*

In his late twenties and appalled at the thought of doing a nine to five until he died, Stephen Koral bought a one-way ticket out of England to go and see the world. Embarking on a year long pub crawl across Asia with no fixed plans, the trip spiralled into a world of Indonesian prisons, police corruption, dodgy celebrities, and psychotic macaque monkeys. The nine to five didn't seem too bad after all.

Whether being chased by annoyed locals in India, getting completely lost in Sri Lanka, avoiding gun owners in Thailand, and possibly most dangerous of all – meeting his future wife, Koral tries to find humour in the difficult, but usually self-imposed troubles found backpacking alone on the road.



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## MEDICAL BAG

Unusual ailments from around the world, including a mystery brain disorder, nightmare worm stories and a woman who believed she was a chicken

### RECORD TAPEWORM

Thailand's Parasitic Disease Research Center has reported finding an 18-metre (60ft) long tapeworm in a patient in Nong Khai. The patient had submitted a faecal sample at a mobile testing unit which revealed tell-tale tapeworm signs. Medication was used to bring out the parasite, which had entered the patient's body as a result of eating uncooked beef. The record-breaking *Taenia saginata* was the longest-detected tapeworm in 50 years. They can live in people for 30 years, but advances in medication usually makes this an unlikely occurrence. *thaivisa.com*, 22 Mar 2021.

### HEAD CASES

Two gruesome reports from the *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*. Following an MRI scan, doctors initially thought a 25-year-old Australian woman's chronic headaches were caused by a brain tumour. However, during an operation, they discovered a cyst of tapeworm larvae in her brain. She has since made a full recovery.

A Japanese woman's sore throat was caused by a worm hitching a ride on one of her tonsils. Doctors at St Luke's International Hospital in Tokyo removed a nematode roundworm with tweezers after the patient complained of throat pain. The patient said she had eaten assorted sashimi five days earlier. *15 July; D.Telegraph*, 5 Oct 2020.

### STRANGE LACUNA

A woman lost her short-term memory when she went for a dip last November. Sue Hodge, 66, a member of a women's sea swimming group in Newquay, Cornwall, has no recollection of going to the beach or entering the water. Her friend Sue Semley, who was with her, said: "I called her name and she was



just staring, didn't know where she was and became more agitated." Mrs Hodge's next memory is of doctors telling her seven hours later that the cold water had triggered transient global amnesia. She said she would steer clear of the sea for now. *Metro*, 9 Dec 2020.

### TEMPORARY CHICKEN

"Clinical zoanthropy, the conviction of having turned into an animal, is a rare delusion. There have been only 56 case descriptions in medical and historical literature between 1850 and 2012. Patients have reported believing that they are a dog, lion, tiger, hyena, rhinoceros, rabbit, horse, snake, bird, wild boar, gerbil, and a bee. This delusion can occur with an underlying psychiatric disorder, but it can also be secondary to structural or functional disorders of the brain.

"In this case report, we describe a 54-year-old woman who was briefly convinced she was a chicken. She had no history of drug or alcohol abuse, and was found by her brother in her garden clucking and blowing her cheeks before crowing like a rooster. On arrival at an accident and emergency ward, the woman expressed her conviction of being a chicken, and spoke of

feeling new sensations in her limbs. Following a seizure, thoughts of being a chicken no longer plague the woman, and she was said to be embarrassed by the episode. With this case report, we hope to contribute to documenting this rare, but possibly underreported phenomenon." *Tijdschrift voor Psychiatrie* (Utrecht), 62 (2020) 7, 582-586.

Curiously, this phenomenon is presented as distinct from clinical lycanthropy, a delusion that the affected person can transform into, has transformed into, or is, a wolf. This again is distinct from folkloric lycanthropy – a wild talent in which humans are said to physically shapeshift into wolves.

### MYSTERY BRAIN DISORDER

A mystery illness is baffling Canadian doctors. For over a year, public health officials have been tracking a cluster of 43 cases of suspected neurological disease with no known cause. Symptoms includes spasms, muscle atrophy, memory loss and hallucinations. Such a small number of cases has meant that tracing the illness's cause has proved difficult. Residents of the Acadia region of New Brunswick first learned of the investigation

LEFT AND BELOW: Staff at Thailand's Parasitic Disease Research Center with the 18-metre (60ft) long tapeworm.



in March 2021 after a leaked memo from the province's public health agency asked physicians to be on the lookout for symptoms similar to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. But despite initial similarities, screening produced no confirmed cases of CJD, the rare and fatal brain disease caused by misformed proteins known as prions. "We don't have evidence to suggest it's a prion disease," said Dr Alier Marrero, the neurologist leading the investigation. "We are collaborating with different national groups and experts; however, no clear cause has been identified at this time."

Now a team of researchers is seeking to establish whether they are dealing with a previously unknown neurological syndrome, or a series of unrelated, but previously known, and hopefully treatable, ailments. Dr Marrero said patients had initially complained of unexplained pains, spasms and behavioural changes, all of which could be easily diagnosed as symptoms of anxiety or depression. But over 18 to 36 months they began developing cognitive decline, muscle wasting, drooling and teeth chattering. A number also experienced frightening hallucinations, including the feeling of insects crawling on





their skin. For a new case to be included in the New Brunswick cluster, Dr Marrero and his team conduct an extensive study of the patient's history, as well as a series of tests including brain imaging, metabolic and toxicology tests and spinal taps. This is so that they can rule out other possible illnesses like dementia, neurodegenerative disorders, autoimmune disorders or possible infections.

Just one suspected case was recorded in 2015, but in 2019 there were 11, and 24 in 2020. Researchers believe five people have died from the illness so far. "We have not seen over the last 20-plus years a cluster of diagnosis-resistant neurological disease like this one," said Michael Coulthart, head of Canada's CJD surveillance network.

The majority of cases are associated with the Acadian peninsula, a sparsely populated region in the north-eastern part of the province. The overall number of cases in the cluster remains low, but New Brunswick has a population of less than 800,000 people. Neurology, environmental health, field epidemiology, zoonotics and toxicology experts have all been consulted, and a growing team of researchers are working to determine if there is a common link to the cases, or if any environmental causes, including water sources, plants and insects, can be established.

Experts have cautioned against drawing premature conclusions. "I don't really know if we even have a defined syndrome. There just isn't enough information yet," said Valerie Sim, a researcher of neurodegenerative diseases at the University of Alberta. She noted that the wide range of symptoms in the cluster was "atypical" for most brain diseases. At the same time, certain cancers, dementia or even misdiagnoses could explain the scope of symptoms, she said, adding: "We see odd neurological syndromes from time to time. Sometimes we figure them out. Sometimes we don't." *Guardian*, 30 Mar 2021.



## FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

### SOCIAL FAIRIES

It is a commonplace among fairysts that the fairies seen today in midnight walks are not the same as those seen 800 or even 100 years ago. Twenty-first century fairies are smaller: they are often doll-sized, or even butterfly-sized. They frequently have wings. They are connected much more closely to plants and to vegetation. But after having pushed, over several years, through scores of descriptions of fairy experiences, I'm increasingly struck by another, I think, more important change.

Fairies in the 13th and indeed in the 19th century, were, over large parts of Britain and Continental Europe, social. They lived in groups: fairyland was a community, be it under that rock or behind that waterfall. Fairies had hierarchies: there were fairy kings and queens, courtiers and commoners. Fairies carried out social activities: they cooked, they washed, they took care of children, they flirted, they made love, they married, they had funerals, they hunted, they danced, they fought battles... Our earliest mediæval fairy accounts show us fairy societies, and this element is still dominant in British fairy experiences into the late 19th century. It is still there in the extraordinary lived experiences in Irish, Scottish and Manx accounts in Evans-Wentz's *Fairy Faith in Celtic Lands*. But the social fairy did not properly

survive the Great War. Marjorie Johnson's *Seeing Fairies*, with accounts from the 1930s to the 1990s (see **FT321:38-45**), and my *Fairy Census* (**FT362:30-37**) offer little in the way of social fairies. If you listen to someone's fairy experience today, it is far more likely to be a run-in with the spirit of a rose bush or a tree, than a glimpse of, say, a fairy wedding party.

Even when fairies are seen in groups, they tend to be what I think of as 'hive' fairies: gnomes hammering at a stone in time; fairies walking in lockstep, Borg-style, across a field; rows of fairies chattering incessantly 'like birds' on the branches of a tree. Individuals rarely emerge from modern group fairy encounters.

Why? Is it that earlier accounts were more likely to survive as folk tales where fairies were given a social gloss? Or is this a real change in our perception of the impossible – a reflection of our

own increasingly individualistic, fragmented societies?

Alternatively, if you want to apply taxonomies to the supernatural, are we dealing with an entirely different species? Did the 'real' fairies decamp, as folklore assures us, to escape railways and factories, gunpowder and 5G? By this logic, modern fairy-seers encounter not 'fairies', but 'landscape spirits': the bogies under the bridge and the troll in the tree.

Simon has edited *Sheridan Le Fanu's Scary Fairy Tales: Four Tales of Fairy Horror* (2020).

FAIRIES LIVED  
IN GROUPS:  
FAIRYLAND WAS  
A COMMUNITY, BE  
IT UNDER THAT  
ROCK OR BEHIND  
THAT WATERFALL





## Watching the skies

**NIGEL WATSON** surveys the latest sightings and ufological news from around the world

### DETECTING UAPs

The search for UAPs – whatever they may be – has now begun in earnest. Professor Avi Loeb, who claims the interstellar object ‘Oumuamua is a craft built by aliens (see **FT404:14**) has announced the setting up of Project Galileo. It is intended to take seriously the existence of Extraterrestrial Technological Civilisations (ETCs) and to drag the study of UAPs from the anecdotal “to the mainstream of transparent, validated and systematic scientific research” using a network of high-resolution telescopes accompanied by cameras and detection arrays. Furthermore, data from the Vera C Rubin Observatory (VRO) will be used to search for ‘Oumuamua-type objects in the Solar System, and in future it is intended to search for any ETC satellites orbiting the Earth.

Skyhub is another relatively new project aimed at collecting and analysing UFO and UAP data. It sells consumer-grade tracking units with the ambition to create a global civilian network. They are weather-protected units with a camera with a fish-eye lens and additional sensors like magnetometers and RF spectrum monitors. A microcomputer analyses the incoming data and if an anomaly is detected it is sent to the Skyhub Cloud, where it is available for research purposes. So far, they have mainly spotted aircraft, meteors, birds and a drone. A tracker on 13 April 2021 at Anchorage, Alaska, did capture out-of-focus “multiple unknown objects” that are possibly balloons or space junk tumbling to Earth ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOYoHhGrCCw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOYoHhGrCCw)).

Such projects are nothing new. Throughout the world there are existing meteor-camera set-ups and systems tracking the night sky, like the UK Meteor Network; and the Multiple Anomaly Detection & Automated Recording (MADAR) project has been running since 1970. It has developed increasingly sophisticated detection and recording devices that are positioned throughout the USA. Their website provides extensive details of anomalies detected by the network, and even includes a map of on-going activity. There is also a similar UFOData project that aims to collect scientific data about UFOs using digital cameras and instrumentation technology.

We’ve come a long way from the detectors of the 1960s that consisted of a magnetic needle that triggered an alarm if a UFO came within its range. Whether they worked or not, they did attract the attention of celebrities; John Lennon bought one in a New York novelty



shop in 1965 that had a grid of lights on the front. When a similarly primitive UFO detector was found in Wharton State Forest, near Tabernacle Township it was “disarmed” by New Jersey State Park Police on 9 April 2021. The operation involved unplugging headphone wires from a tin can and a block of wood, so it was certainly a low-tech “threat”.

*MADAR Project:* <https://store.madar.site/info>; *Galileo Project:* <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/galileo>; *UFOData Project:* <https://www.ufodata.net/>

### GREEN FIREBALLS

There has been disquiet that some of these new UAP projects are opportunistic and overly ambitious, which takes us to the subject of the elusive green fireballs that caused something of a scare in New Mexico from 1948 to the early 1950s. Dr Lincoln LaPaz, head of the University of New Mexico’s Institute of Meteoritics, thought they were caused by secret “unconventional defensive devices” being tested by the US or Soviet spying devices. Since there were sightings in the vicinity of Holloman Air Force Base, it was decided to set up Project Twinkle with the intention of gaining observations using telescopes, cameras and equipment to measure any unusual electromagnetic frequencies. As Edward J Ruppelt, head of Project Blue Book from 1952 to 1953, put it: “Project Twinkle was a bust. Absolutely nothing was photographed. Of the three cameras that were planned for the project, only one was available. This one camera was continually being moved from place to place. If several reports came from a certain area, the camera crew would load up their equipment and move to that area, always arriving too late. Any duck hunter can tell you that this is the wrong tactic; if you want to shoot any ducks pick a good place and stay put, let the ducks come to you.”

The final report for the project noted that

most of the sightings are attributable to natural phenomena, including small clouds reflecting moonlight, or atypical meteors. Its author, Louis Elterman, felt their findings were inconclusive and recommended further vigilance but did not recommend any further funding of this project. Nonetheless, green fireballs are still making dramatic appearances; this year, one zipped over Texas on the night of Sunday 25 July and over Izmir, Turkey, at 2am on 31 July. Stephen Hughes puts forward the theory that one of three green fireballs seen over Queensland, Australia, on 16 May 2006 created an electrically conductive pathway that produced enough energy to create ball lightning. So they are still something of an enigma. [www.project1947.com/gfb/twinklereport.htm](https://project1947.com/gfb/twinklereport.htm); “Green fireballs and ball lightning”: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspa.2010.0409>

### SIXTY YEARS OF BETTY & BARNEY

On 19 September it will be 60 years since the Betty and Barney Hill abduction occurred, and it still leaves us baffled and confused. The ‘Three-Dollar Kit’ website provides a critical account of their experience, including explanations for their UFO sightings that night, the missing time, the star map and the rest of the alleged physical evidence and the media influences on Betty’s nightmares and subsequent hypnotic regression sessions.

Ufologists have tended to overlook the racial elements of the case, but they are an underlying yet very important factor. David Drysdale of the University of Western Ontario in his essay “Alienated Histories, Alienating Futures: Raciology and Missing Time in *The Interrupted Journey*” notes: “Without mastery of the technologies of the alien, in the postracial future, Barney Hill is effectively divorced from his own history. Just as he is consistently shunted aside in *The Interrupted Journey*, denied the ability to converse with the future humans on board the alien ship, and unable to give voice to his trauma, the history of racial oppression in the United States will be concealed, accessible only when those who control the powerful imaging technologies allow it.”

It was very much Betty’s show from start to finish, whereas Barney was the victim, and whether we like it or not they launched a modern-day mythology that is firmly ingrained in the public psyche. <https://threedollarkit.weebly.com/betty-barney-hill.html>; “Alienated Histories...”: <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/esc/article/download/9874/7974>





# The flip-flop effect

JENNY RANGLES explores the multiple realities revealed in dreams, UFO sightings and photographs

This column – not for the first time – was inspired by a dream. I take note of them more than most, as regular readers will know. This one was weird, aiding ideas that I've been developing for years about the nature of the close encounter experience – a search for the 'it' that turns an anomalous observation into a lifelong memory that will shape how you personally view the Universe.

I will return to my dream, but first consider this 1933 photograph from Loch Ness in Scotland, one of many depicting the fabled monster snaking across the water. Now look at the second photo. It shows the hand of a man who had gone to sleep worrying about the ashes of a family member that had been misplaced during a clean-up. On waking, he was astounded to see etched in dried blood on his wrist were the words "Urn" and "Max". He called his brother Max, who, it turned out, had kept the small urn for safekeeping during the works.

This visual evidence of supernatural intervention, there before your eyes, would make it easy to think these were remarkable photographs. Except neither is – at least not in the way I have described them. The second photo is real, but I made up the explanation of what it shows, even though you may see the words "Urn" and "Max" in the scratches. In the case of the Nessie photo, I suspect the person who took it knew very well what it showed, but was intrigued by what it might be *thought* to show. I don't think the photo shows a monster, but the blurred image of a dog swimming towards the camera with a stick in its mouth. You can see it once it's been suggested to you: it is a flip-flop of how your mind was thinking on first seeing it.

The second photograph is a different story. The picture really was submitted by a witness as evidence of something extraordinary – although nothing to do with an urn or a person called Max. If you saw those things in the photo, then you did so purely because of the suggestion I placed in your mind. The "scratched" words were entirely my invention and nothing to do with the witness. In fact, the witness had offered this image of his hand as evidence of a UFO encounter over his West Midlands home. At first, he'd thought it was a vivid dream, until the evidence he found on waking suggested otherwise. A neighbour later independently told of seeing a glowing UFO over the man's garden that same night. So this 'dream' was now made 'real' both through visual evidence and a back-up witness, turning



into what looks like three letters – UFO – scratched in blood on the man's hand.

By whom, of course is another question. Possible options are an ET graffiti artist or the man himself, perhaps without realising it. Was it scratched there as a subconscious reminder of a vivid experience (real or dream)? We do odd things during altered states of consciousness. Indeed, a UFO witness once told me they were so scared of not recalling a vivid sighting occurring while in bed at night that they rearranged their room in such a way they could not possibly miss the changes on waking, which would act as a trigger to recall the encounter. Drawing blood as a reminder that you saw a UFO might be taking that principle to extremes. My point is that reality is not as fixed as we think it to be and what looks to be the obvious answer is often not the only possibility. We can experience things in many different ways *and* sometimes even forget we have experienced them.

As for the dream that led me to write this column, it was a very vivid and strange one, but not of a UFO. It was a lengthy sequence in which I had multiple awakenings. Each time I returned to sleep, the world I went back to was continuous but different in some way from the last one; I accepted them all as being a continuation of the same 'world', and the (super)natural manner in which they kept changing form saw everyone else carry on as if nothing had changed at all. In my dreamscape there were some links – like a room that stayed the same, just with slightly different décor – yet the main sense I got from this powerful dream was that the world was changing outside; the sky

a different colour – greenish one day, and a shade of mauve the next. And there was always a sense of ominous but unstated menace that I knew was out there.

But the oddest part was my accepting, as I did throughout, that reality was not, as we assume, an external world, the same for each of us when we wake up every morning. Instead, we each were able to reinvent the world every time we rose, but covered up this 'secret' via the belief that it was in fact consistent and unchanging. In truth, permanence was an illusion acting as a cloak to hide our own magic trickery.

That is also what I did by changing the story of the mark on the man's arm, or the man taking the photo of a dog, blurred by the limitations of 1930s technology. Maybe he did, too, when he turned it into a monster that others would see and accept.

How might this relate to the UFO mystery? We live our lives with the presumption that we see what others see and our reality is the same as theirs. Yet if we can manipulate how others perceive the world – just as the great illusionists have always done to make you think you can see the impossible – then perhaps we each are in our own little bubble universe that we only *appear* to share with billions of other people; in truth, they are part of our perception, and we perhaps part of their, possibly quite different, version of reality.

Seeking to prove what a witness experienced may be a futile exercise. Their reality and ours could be two fleetingly intersecting tracks that cross and then diverge forever. If it is raining in our world and someone says the sun is shining in theirs, both can be true. So why not?

All of this seems absurd. Can our minds actually forge and change reality, or modify our perception of the Universe, without us consciously knowing that we are doing it? I realise this is not a revolutionary idea – it has been expressed in different ways by philosophers and film-makers – but we need a way to understand what we see when investigating the extraordinary that can explain both the absurdity and the profundity of the events experienced. This might be one option, although it would mean there is no such thing as a single reality... other than the one that we forge for ourselves each day. Perhaps the true importance of the paradoxical absurdities that UFO phenomena and fortaean events share is to give us a glimpse into the way that the Universe operates...



# REVISITING THE MYSTERIOUS WORLD OF ARTHUR C CLARKE

Just over 40 years ago, unsuspecting ITV viewers were taken on a sometimes terrifying tour of the planet's anomalies – from “the missing apeman” to “the Skull of Doom”.

**RYAN SHIRLOW** hits the rewind button and reappraises a classic of fortean television.

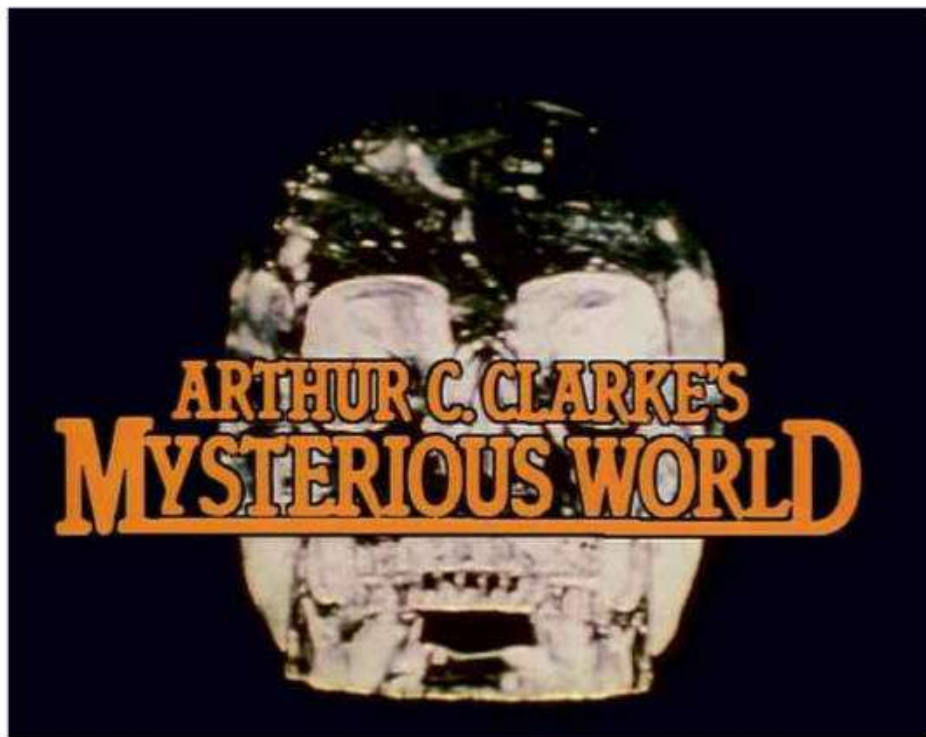
Over the course of 13 short episodes first broadcast in 1980, *The Mysterious World of Arthur C Clarke* took teatime

viewers of ITV through the case files of the celebrated science fiction writer – also solemnly identified as the “inventor of the communications satellite” in case we doubted his authority.<sup>1</sup>

With only 25 minutes for each instalment, Clarke – “*now in retreat in Sri Lanka after a lifetime of science, space and writing, he ponders the riddles of this and other worlds*” – flitted from subject to subject in a brief, distracted, almost jarring fashion. The feeling was of leafing through a fortean scrapbook or a collage of nightmares: “*Does an ape man walk the uncharted forests of America’s Northwest? What unknown monster of the sea grappled with this US Navy Frigate in South American waters? Why did people raise up this enormous circle of stones on Orkney 4,000 years ago? Who drew this giant, the largest figure in the world, on Chile’s loneliest mountain? And whose hands fashioned the Skull of Doom? Does it bring death?*”

The programme was scheduled in an early evening slot guaranteed to traumatised children; my mother quickly learnt to switch off the TV as soon as the glowing Mitchell-Hedges skull appeared in the title sequence. Her swift action only added to my sense of the forbidden, and of a world much vaster and stranger than any I had yet experienced.

Viewing *Mysterious World* again after all these years, it’s easy to appreciate the show’s original appeal: Gordon Honeycombe’s ominous voice-over; the grainy archive footage; Alan Hawkshaw’s sinister synthetic soundtrack. But that mysterious world now feels hemmed in by the claustrophobic, box-like aspect ratio of early Eighties television, and many of the so-called ‘mysteries’ have



LEFT: The chilling Mitchell-Hedges skull from the opening title sequence.

BELOW: Arthur C Clarke, “in retreat in Sri Lanka”.

not fared well over time.

Here, then, is my episode-by-episode reappraisal of this seminal series and the subjects it explored, including what – if anything – we have managed to learn since then.

## Episode 1: The Journey Begins

We start our adventure with a ludicrously fast kaleidoscopic overview of the coming series, over which Clarke introduces his clunky ‘Orders of Mystery’. It’s

fair to say that these, with their obvious debt to Hynek’s system of ‘Close Encounters’, haven’t caught on as a useful approach for fortean research.

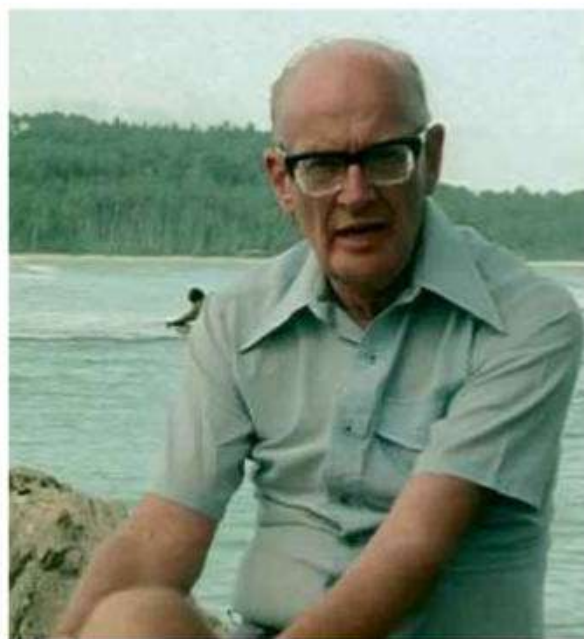
Mysteries of the first kind, Clarke tells us, were inexplicable to our ancestors, but are no longer mysteries to us. He illustrates this category with an atmospheric live commentary of an Indian solar eclipse.

Mysteries of the second kind are those for which we don’t yet have definitive explanations, but do at least possess some ‘clues’ – so they might remain in this category forever if no new evidence is forthcoming. As examples, Clarke teases a range of mysterious animals and relics from the episodes to come.

With mysteries of the third and final kind, we have nothing to go on: these are the “completely unaccountable” enigmas among which Clarke places psychic phenomena and that fortean favourite, fish falls.

I must say that Clarke does not come across at first as a particularly confident or polished presenter, with the heavy lifting left to Honeycombe in the connecting segments. But we do get a taste of the period-perfect vox pops we’ll quickly come

## THE FEELING WAS OF LEAFING THROUGH A FORTEAN SCRAP- BOOK OR A COLLAGE OF NIGHTMARES





to expect when two Scottish ladies describe their brief encounter with ball lightning: *“The beach attendant – he had a wooden leg... well, you never saw him move so quick in your life...”*

## Episode 2: Monsters of the Deep

Some sense of focus kicks in as we start the series proper with a look at sea monsters. Professor John Cloudsley-Thompson, giving every impression of having escaped from the imagination of Scarfolk creator Richard Littler, gleefully describes a giant squid attack on the survivors of a WWII naval battle. Interesting, yes; gruesome, certainly – but mysterious? We are shown some footage of a giant squid found in 1979, near Newfoundland, to underline the biological reality of these fearsome beasts.

Accounts of sea serpents, on the other hand, remain far more controversial. The photographs of a hideous corpse found off the coast of New Zealand by a Japanese trawler are compared convincingly with the results of marine decomposition. The suspected process, by which parts of a shark or whale’s body decay and fall away, leaving the cadaver with the serpentine appearance of a small head and a long neck, has also been laid out in FT (see, for example, **FT175:58-59**). But other credible witnesses are brought forward to contest this analysis, describing fresh cadavers washed up on beaches – and, of course, encounters with entities that are still very much alive, inquisitive and aggressive.

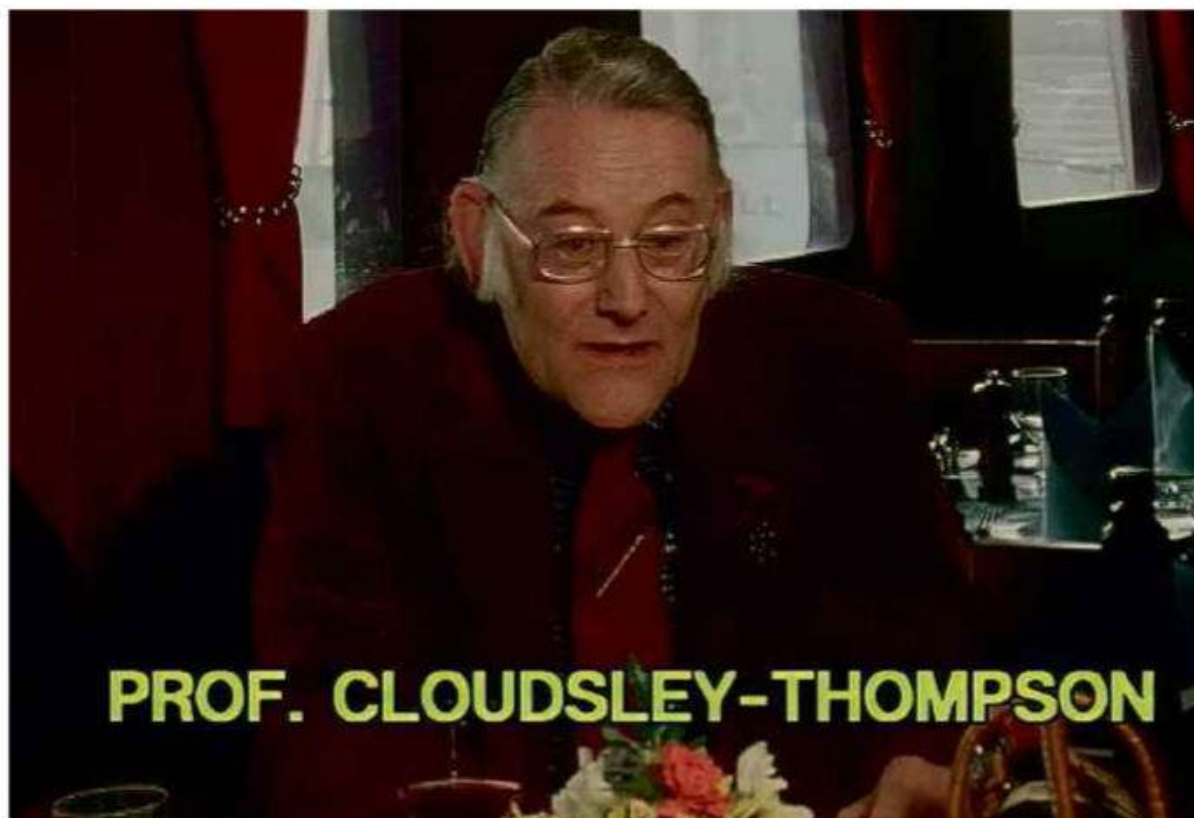
Whatever they are, we can only delight that the remains of one such monster are apparently buried under the football pitch at St Ninian’s Roman Catholic Primary School in Goruch. Scraps of a “seaman’s jersey” and a tablecloth were found in its stomach.

In conclusion, a sympathetic Clarke holds out much hope for the deployment of advanced sonar technology across the submarines operated by the Cold War superpowers. Forty years later, we know how little positive evidence this has revealed (assuming secret naval discoveries leak as readily as anything from air force archives concerning UFOs).

## Episode 3: Ancient Wisdom

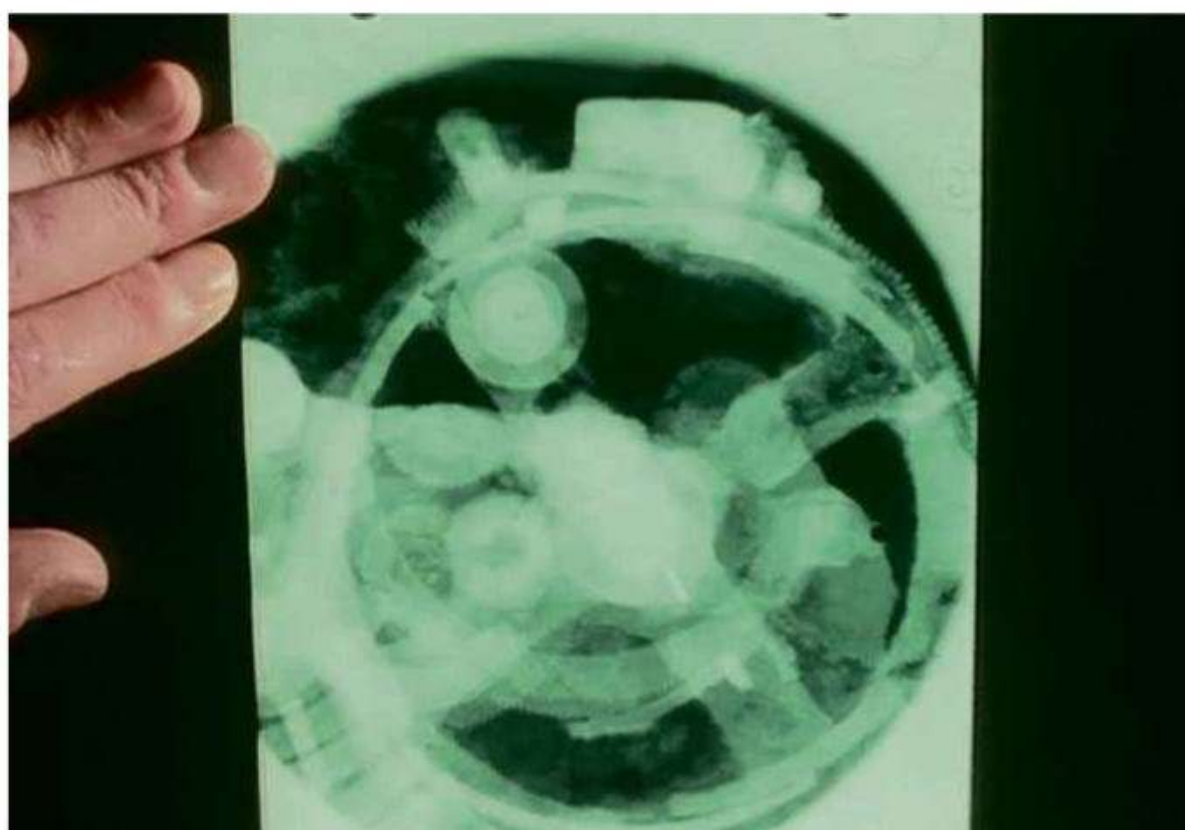
Clarke begins this episode with a thinly-veiled swipe at fellow author Erich von Däniken, citing the amount of rubbish written by ‘ancient astronaut’ theorists about the people of the past. According to Clarke, our ancestors didn’t need any “help from outer space”.<sup>2</sup>

The first ancient artefact up for examination is that iconic Mitchell-Hedges skull (see **FT237:28-35**), described as the largest worked gemstone in the world. The “flawless” surface makes it “impossible to date”, but there is no suggestion that it was impossible *to make*, merely that its creation would have been very time consuming. The programme concludes the skull is probably a couple of hundred years old, despite local insistence in Honduras that it was linked with Mayan legends from 3,600 years ago.



**TOP:** The improbably named Professor Cloudsley-Thompson. **CENTRE:** The corpse of a giant squid recovered off Newfoundland in 1979 – a biological reality. **ABOVE:** An alleged sea serpent carcass caught by a Japanese trawler.





## “MY COLLEAGUE DR CAROCOLAS HAS BEEN EXPERIMENTING WITH GAMMA RAYS”

Tests carried out in 2007 revealed the skull had in fact been worked with a “high speed, hard metal rotary tool coated with a hard abrasive, such as diamond”<sup>3</sup> and was most likely of 20th century origin, which is when it was ‘discovered’. It does remain a fantastic feat of sculpture, and its place in the opening credits is at least aesthetically justified (and, for fortune’s of a certain age, means it will be forever linked with *Mysterious World*).

The next item was new to me: an investigation into vitrified forts in Scotland, including one at Tap O’Noth. Did ancient builders melt the rock walls, and for what purpose? Dr Ian Ralston and a large team of helpers set a massive bonfire, but with great difficulty they succeed in transforming only a small handful of rocks. Researchers in 2018 concluded the vitrification, evident at sites across northern Europe, was actually caused by the fiery destruction of an original timber superstructure. Blocks of molten stone can be formed in the anærobic conditions caused by the tremendous heat from above.<sup>4</sup>

Next, Dr Arne Eggebrecht discusses his analysis of the ‘Baghdad battery’, filling a replica of this mysterious ceramic pot, copper cylinder and iron rod with grape juice to generate a measurable voltage. Although this unusual object is intriguing, the archaeological consensus is that it was never intended for use as a battery, is probably nowhere near as old as presented here, and that scant evidence exists from any contemporaneous finds for its proposed use in electroplating. It was more probably a simple ritual container for scrolls (a possibility Clarke acknowledges). Unfortunately, the object was among thousands looted from national museums during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>5</sup> A sad loss, but one that cements the object’s fortune status for posterity.

Finally, we get an overview of the Antikythera mechanism, also well known to FT readers (see FT250:51-53). This block of corroded bronze from “the time of Christ” was dredged up off the coast of the Greek island from which it takes its name. We learn that “...my good colleague Dr Caracolas has been experimenting with gamma rays” and that his analysis has revealed differential gears buried deep inside the artefact. The programme concludes with a reconstructed copy of the device operating as a primitive analogue

**TOP:** Dr Arne Eggebrecht demonstrates his electroplating theory of the Baghdad Battery. **CENTRE:** Inside the Antikythera Mechanism. **ABOVE:** This screenshot demonstrates another primitive computer from ancient times, one capable of rendering rudimentary graphics and maps for the TV of the era.



computer, tracking the celestial cycles of the Moon and Sun. In 2008, a team from Cardiff University used high resolution scans to reveal faint inscriptions on the outer casing, confirming this purpose. Officially no longer a mystery, the Antikythera mechanism is indeed a piece of ancient technology that challenges our preconceptions about the distant past.<sup>6</sup>

#### Episode 4: The Missing Apeman

We start with a close-up shot of a rifle being cocked: this is a literal hunt for the missing apeman, wanted dead or alive.

In the first part of the programme we learn that Lord Hunt, of Everest fame,<sup>7</sup> became a believer in the Himalayan Yeti. Villagers present a Yeti scalp (see FT277:17) in a box, and chief Khunjon Chumbi wears this on his head while he imitates the creature's cry for the credulous cameramen. More convincing is the testimony of the frightened young Sherpa, Lakhpa Domani. We are shown various photographs of footprints in the snow, none of which look very much like each other (a problem noted by Clarke) and many barely resemble biologically plausible feet. Clarke warns us that "melting snow can play strange tricks." Meanwhile, Squadron Leader Lester Davis reminds us how the British should dress when abroad and mountaineer Don Whillans demonstrates how a Lancashire man retains his northern composure in the face of a Yeti attack.

Despite the intervening decades, conclusive proof still eludes us. In 2017, *National Geographic* traced DNA from hair, teeth, fur and faeces recovered in the region to Himalyan brown and black bears.<sup>8</sup> (FT362:23) More recently, in Russia, the former governor of Kemerovo province has admitted hoaxing sightings of the Russian Yeti or Almasty to boost the local tourist industry<sup>9</sup> (see FT407:9).

In the second half of this episode, we travel to the other side of the world to consider Bigfoot. Dr Grover Krantz (the man with the rifle) cites hundreds if not thousands of sightings, many from reputable citizens. He speculates that around 200 Sasquatch may live in the isolated and sparsely inhabited north west of the United States, with a similar number just across the border in Canada. Any less would fail to represent a viable breeding population. We hear from some of the aforementioned reputable citizens, including police officers and native Americans. Some sightings involve more than one observer. There are shades of *Anchorman* Ron Burgundy's period misogyny as we learn that Bigfoot is attracted to menstruating women. Astonishing footage follows of "used feminine articles" prepared for bait and hung on a telegraph pole. A purported recording of vocalisations is genuinely terrifying; if a creative work of sound production, it is worthy of *Stuart Maconie's Freakzone*.



TOP: Grover Krantz, rifle at the ready. CENTRE: Nepalese Yeti impressionist Khunjo Chumbi. ABOVE: Squadron Leader Lester Davis in patriotic garb.





**TOP:** The Nazca lines of Peru, a source of speculation about ancient astronauts dismissed by Clarke.  
**CENTRE:** The Cerne Abbas Giant, shown here with the lion pelt of Hercules dangling from his left arm.  
**ABOVE:** The wild man of Cerne is a fertility icon and sex symbol to his local fans.

The infamous Patterson-Gimlin footage is aired next. This has been dissected thoroughly in FT over the years (for a recent overview, see **FT360:32-39**) and is widely believed by scientists to be a gorilla-suited hoax – one that doesn’t even match the descriptions given by other witnesses. Participants in the charade have since come forward, but their testimony is itself disputed by other believers (see **FT192:34-39**).<sup>10</sup> Clarke has relevant experience here as he reminds us of the convincing special effects and costumes at the start of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The “father of cryptozoology”, Bernard Heuvelmans, is on record as agreeing with the fancy dress hypothesis.<sup>11</sup>

In his conclusion, Clarke is even more sceptical of Bigfoot than he is of the Yeti. In 2019, the FBI released its research into Bigfoot: hair samples they had analysed came from wild deer.<sup>12</sup> But again, all those eye witness accounts from so many individuals with little to gain are hard to dismiss. What exactly did they see? Was it something more mysterious, perhaps supernatural in origin, than a flesh-and-blood missing link?

### Episode 5: Giants for the Gods

We begin this episode with a gallery of inaccessible frescos hundreds of feet up a sheer cliff in Sigirya, Sri Lanka. Why were they painted in a spot where they could not be easily admired? The current theory is that the paintings once covered the whole cliff face,<sup>13</sup> but only those in this difficult-to-reach section have survived. A couple of years later, Duran Duran filmed the music video for their hit single “Save a Prayer” at Sigirya, effectively denuding the site of any mystery for future generations.

Then it’s on to the famous Nazca lines of Peru. Jim Woodman’s hot air Heath Robinson gondola recreates the alleged aeronautical capabilities of the South American Indians (mainstream archaeology remains unconvinced). Honeycombe trots out the speculation this “fantastic picture book” of animal shapes and abstract designs was once an airport for ancient astronauts. Clarke counters that the perfectly straight lines can be laid out easily enough using a team of Peruvian schoolboys armed with “ranging poles”. The drawings would have been harder, but not impossible to “scale up”. Many more lines have, of course, been discovered since, some as recently as October 2020, when a 120ft (36m) geoglyph of a cartoon cat was found and substantially renovated (see **FT400:14**).<sup>14</sup>

Were the lines an astronomical calendar? We are treated to footage of vintage computers whirring away in consideration. The results: associations vary – to the heavens, to mountains and to other geographical features, representing pathways to potential god ‘objects’. Needless to say, debate continues.

Closer to home and to English country





IMAGES COURTESY NETWORK RELEASING

## CERNE ABBAS LOCALS SPECULATE ON THE FERTILITY POWERS OF THEIR PRIAPIC HILL GIANT

chalk figures. At Cerne Abbas in Dorset the locals speculate on the fertility powers of their priapic hill giant. A then cutting edge “resistivity survey” identifies where the ground may have been disturbed and original lines lost. An unexpected area appears beneath the left arm suggesting a lion’s pelt and a positive identification with the second century Roman portrayal of Hercules.

Unfortunately, the latest analysis by the National Trust, completed last year (see FT406:4), contradicts any such origin. “Optically stimulated luminescence” indicates the figure was cut by the late Anglo Saxons, which would make the figure contemporary with (and perhaps a protest against?) the nearby Abbey.<sup>15</sup> The figure presumably fell into a long period of disuse before being rediscovered and relaid at a later date.

In Uffington, Berkshire, Britain’s “strangest and oldest” white horse is dated to well before the 12th century; the design is noted as similar to pre-Roman coins. This suggestion is bang on, as a 1990 excavation by the Oxford Archæological



TOP: Dr Anthony Clark supervises a cutting-edge (for 1980) resistivity survey at the site of the Cerne Abbas giant. ABOVE: Dr Robert Rines, in search of the Loch Ness Monster.





**TOP:** Ogopogo, now a symbol of the commercial and media identity of the Lake Okanagan region.  
**CENTRE:** A ripple, a log or a giant eel? **ABOVE:** Ivor Newby, in pursuit of Nessie.  
**FACING PAGE:** Arthur C Clarke, pondering “the mysteries of this and other worlds”.

Unit scientifically dated the site to the late Bronze Age, between 1380 and 550 BC. <sup>16</sup>

We are asked to compare it to the lost Red Horse of Tysoe in Warwickshire, now hidden beneath the landscape, but rediscovered thanks to the faintest of ground traces and careful sleuthing through parish records. You will need a believer’s eye to make out the details in this footage.

Finally, we conclude in the Atacama Desert in Chile, where Jim Woodman takes to the air again, this time in a modern helicopter, to reveal more ancient writing and drawings of pumas, jaguars, reptiles, llamas and stylised humans, including a giant that crosses the crest of a mountain.

All absolutely fascinating, but only mysterious in terms of the identity of the human creators and their specific intent. Clarke expounds on “man’s desire for immortality, his urge to leave some abiding mark on the face of his planet.” Yes, this was 1980, and the female artists of the ancient past are left waiting at home in their caves and mud huts.

### Episode 6: The Monsters of the Lakes

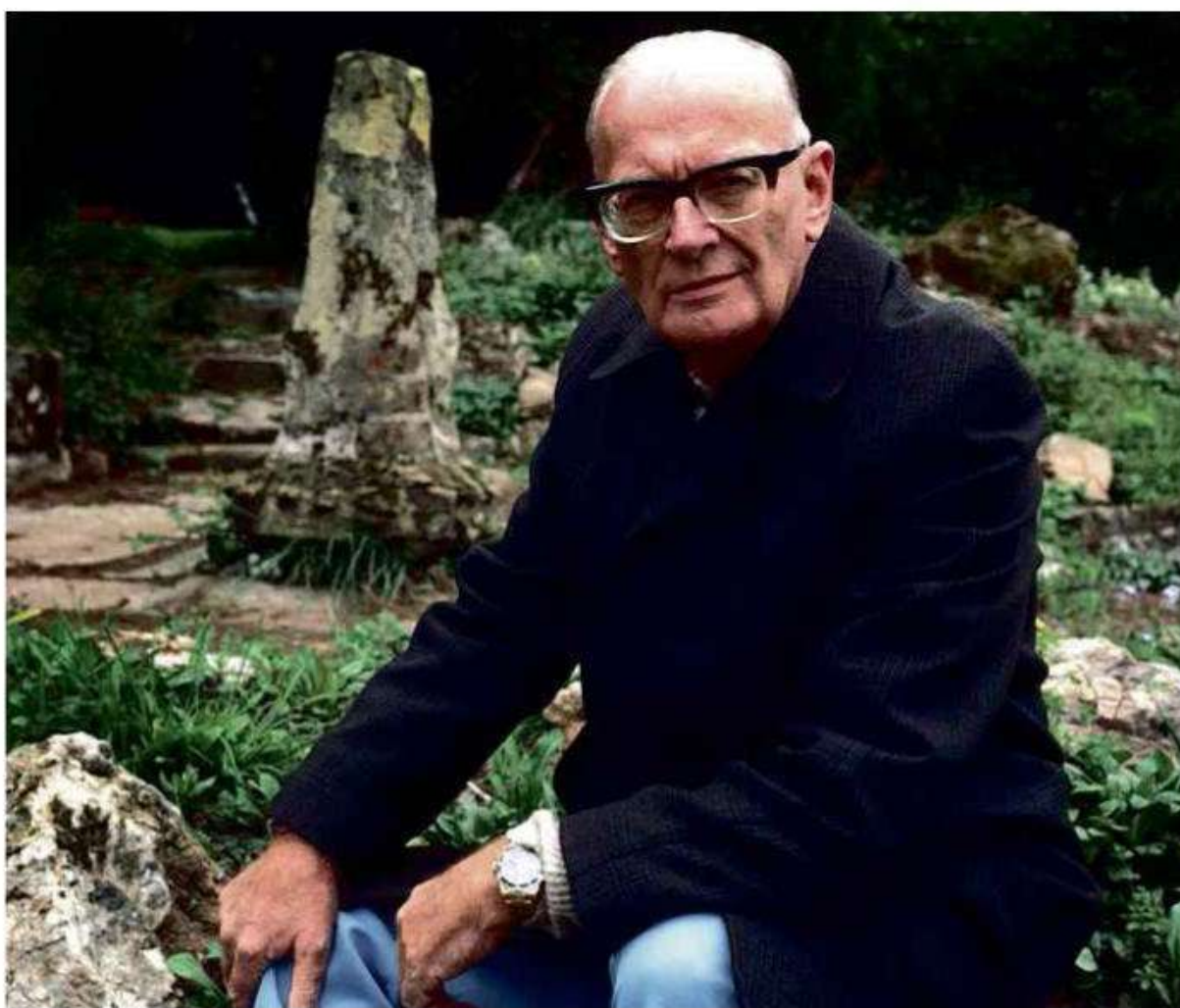
By Clarke’s reckoning, there are at least 50 lakes worldwide with their own resident monster. We start with Lake Okanagan, in British Columbia, home to the legendary Ogopogo (see FT211:52-58). Multiple seemingly credible witnesses, including local Irish Canadians, speak direct to camera, describing a huge beast with a horse’s head, horns and three humps. A film shot by Art Folden in 1968 certainly shows something in the water, but it looks suspiciously rigid and gives a very wooden performance – nothing at all like the active monster described by others.

Ogopogo-mania peaked a few years after this episode was broadcast, with the regional tourist board offering a \$1million-dollar reward for proof of the creature’s existence. In response, Greenpeace named the monster an endangered species. Pat Raphael, of the Westbank First Nation, spoke to BBC travel journalist Lisa Kane last year: “It’s not really a monster; it’s a spirit of the lake and it protects this valley from one end to the other.” But others believe that the unusual waves seen on the lake are caused by “thermal stratification”. <sup>17</sup> Fort would have recognised this type of explanation, as calm and reasonable as it is, as utterly ridiculous in the face of extensive witness testimony.

I wonder if the indigenous beliefs of the natives were somehow taken up by the region’s Scottish and Irish settlers and mixed with their own Celtic lough-lore, mutating over the decades into an altogether more modern phenomenon. As wikipedia archly puts it: “Ogopogo now plays a role in the commercial symbolism and media representation of the region.” <sup>18</sup>

But back to the programme: Ivor Newby takes to Loch Ness in his budget-Bond amphicar, professional big game hunters show off their outsized monster-catching cages, a pig is used as bait in Sweden,





and the Japanese pour *sake* into a lake to appease their beast in the east. We get a short visit to Lough Re, in Ireland. I half expected narrator Gordon Honeycombe to burst into song as he begins: “Three men of the cloth in a boat, out one day in 1960...” There follows an extremely vivid description of their encounter with a serpent, although the three priests involved refrain from drawing the obvious theological parallels.

And finally, we get to Nessie, the most famous lake monster of them all, and a film clip from 1936. Again, the behaviour of the object in the water should be familiar to anyone who has ever played Pooh sticks. What we see here contrasts markedly with the witness statements that follow of live and “undulating” creatures in the loch. Clarke makes clear his own scepticism, but he believes these people are fundamentally truthful, if mistaken: he substitutes wakes in the water and shoals of fish for their dreams of giant reptiles.

Next, veteran researcher Tim Dinsdale complains about how uncomfortable his life jacket is. The footage he presents is not terribly exciting, although it does at least seem to be of an animal rather than a stick. RAF experts were satisfied it was not faked. Clarke then takes us on to the “high technology team” led by Roger Parker, equipped with underwater microphones and sonar. They claim to have tracked an animal over 43ft (13m) in length for one and a half hours; it was apparently also accompanied by a juvenile. These creatures were frightened away – or shoals of fish were dispersed – by a yacht flushing its toilet.

American lawyer Bob Rimes shows us a picture of an indistinct blob. “If Nessie had been a murder case, there would have been a hanging long since.” It makes you glad we don’t have capital punishment here in the

UK.

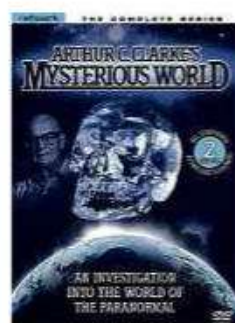
A detailed discussion of all the research since would be too much for this review. But I note a 2018 international DNA study that found no evidence of large fish or sharks, nor anything reptilian. Instead it uncovered a huge quantity of eel DNA. Lead researcher Professor Neil Gemmell suggested Nessie could be an eel of extreme size.<sup>19</sup> This identification would seem consistent with some testimony and, for example, the home video shot by Gordon Holmes in 2007.<sup>20</sup>

### The story so far

So, as we near the halfway point of the series, two distinct types of episode have emerged. Parts three and five had an historical or archaeological focus, presenting items that might be described as merely interesting to fortune hunters rather than genuinely mysterious. Episodes two, four and six feature far more challenging themes of a cryptozoological nature. If relic populations of hominids, sea monsters or lake monsters had somehow survived into the modern era, they couldn’t possibly still exist today – not in a world relentlessly surveyed by Clarke’s satellites and sonar technology. Yet perfectly reasonable people around the world continue to report abnormal and inexplicable encounters with just such impossible creatures.

Is it common to experience things *that simply do not exist*, at least not in an objective physical sense – and for that encounter to be visceral, terrifying, and even life changing? Do Clarke, Honeycombe and another assortment of scientists, monster hunters and witnesses have any answers?

Join me next month for further analysis as we survey episodes 7 to 13 of *Arthur C Clarke’s Mysterious World*.



If you want to join in, I’d recommend buying the excellent 2008 Network DVD collection, which offers by far the best way to view this classic series. (By the way, you can find a little production Easter Egg

if you wind each episode back to 0, showing how the DVD was digitised from the original broadcast footage). Available from <https://networkonair.com/>

### NOTES

- 1 A 27-year-old Clarke is credited with being one of the first to lay out the *concept* of a communication satellite in his 1945 article “Extraterrestrial Relays” in *Wireless World*.
- 2 An opinion not shared by the producers of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.
- 3 [https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/mitchell\\_hedges/microscope.html](https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/mitchell_hedges/microscope.html)
- 4 [www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/archaeologists-solve-ancient-mystery-melted-iron-age-fort-296899](http://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/archaeologists-solve-ancient-mystery-melted-iron-age-fort-296899)
- 5 [www.sciencefriday.com/segments/archaeologists-revisit-iraq/](http://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/archaeologists-revisit-iraq/)
- 6 [www.theguardian.com/science/2006/nov/30/uknews](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2006/nov/30/uknews)
- 7 Hunt was the leader of the successful 1953 British expedition to Everest, in which Edward Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay reached the summit.
- 8 [www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/yeti-legends-real-animals-dna-bears-himalaya-science](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/yeti-legends-real-animals-dna-bears-himalaya-science)
- 9 <https://nypost.com/2021/04/09/russian-official-admits-to-staging-bogus-yeti-sightings/>
- 10 [www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/bigfoot-finally-proved-false-300262926.html](http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/bigfoot-finally-proved-false-300262926.html)
- 11 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patterson%E2%80%93Gimlin\\_film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patterson%E2%80%93Gimlin_film)
- 12 [www.history.com/news/bigfoot-fbi-file-investigation-discovery](http://www.history.com/news/bigfoot-fbi-file-investigation-discovery)
- 13 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigiriya>
- 14 [www.livescience.com/nazca-line-cat-in-peru.html](http://www.livescience.com/nazca-line-cat-in-peru.html)
- 15 [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/cerne-giant/news/national-trust-archaeologists-surprised-by-likely-age-of-cerne-abbas-giant](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/cerne-giant/news/national-trust-archaeologists-surprised-by-likely-age-of-cerne-abbas-giant)
- 16 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uffington\\_White\\_Horse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uffington_White_Horse)
- 17 <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200309-ogopogo-the-monster-lurking-in-okanagan-lake>
- 18 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ogopogo>
- 19 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-49495145>
- 20 [https://youtu.be/A31u\\_q12d9E](https://youtu.be/A31u_q12d9E)

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# MISSING

## THE SAI KUNG MYSTERY

**CHRIS SAUNDERS** investigates a spate of mysterious disappearances and deaths in a Hong Kong beauty spot and asks if Sai Kung Country Park – and its fabled enchantment – represents a kind of Bermuda Triangle for the region’s hikers...

Not so long ago, Hong Kong was a sparsely populated collection of fishing villages. Then, after the first Opium War in 1842, it was made a colony of the British Empire and became a unique melting pot of Eastern and Western ideologies, rising to become one of the world’s most significant financial hubs. After being handed back to China in 1997, Hong Kong vowed to maintain a degree of independence and endeavoured to subsist on a principle of “one country, two systems”. That didn’t work out so well, and mainland China has spent the last quarter of a century trying to reassert itself.

That particular political maelstrom is still up in the air, but some things are more clearly defined. Hong Kong is now one of the most congested and densely populated regions on the planet with almost 7.5 million people crammed into an area of barely 426 square miles (1,104km<sup>2</sup>). It’s only natural that, when circumstances allow, residents would want to get away from it all and perhaps go for a hike in the countryside.

However, if you do this in an area called Sai Kung, you’d better keep your wits about you...

### THE SAI KUNG ENCHANTMENT

Sai Kung district is made up of the southern half of Sai Kung Peninsula, Sai Kung town, Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong Global Geopark, a strip of land to the east of Kowloon, and over 70 islands of varying sizes. Often dubbed “the back garden of Hong Kong” it is known for its picturesque fishing villages, beautiful scenery, wildlife, beaches and hiking trails. Providing a welcome contrast to the hustle and bustle of urban life, it attracts Hong Kongers keen to unwind and get back to nature. A common phrase one hears is “Sai Kung enchantment”, which is normally used to describe people who visit the place and fall under its spell. But as with most things in Chinese culture, there is a deeper, more sinister meaning.

Over the years there have been multiple reports of weird occurrences in Sai Kung. People disappear, usually while out hiking,



### SCRATCH THE SURFACE AND SEVERAL THINGS DON'T ADD UP

and are never seen again. Others are found dead in mysterious circumstances, often after displaying bizarre or erratic behaviour. There have also been survivors, who emerge from the wilderness wide-eyed and full of incredible stories. The strange events have prompted some to compare Sai Kung to the fabled Bermuda Triangle, and there has been a lot of Internet chat pertaining to some kind of portal that enables people to flit between worlds or dimensions. Other theories to explain the disappearances range from a deranged killer on the loose to the place being haunted or simply having “bad feng shui”, which in Chinese superstition is

**LEFT:** Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated areas on Earth – no wonder people want to escape for a bit of peaceful hiking.

tantamount to being cursed.

The most recent incident occurred on 16 March this year, when 58-year old construction worker Lam Wing-chun left his apartment on the Yee Ming Estate to go hiking alone in Sai Kung. When he failed to return, his family contacted police and within 24 hours an 80-strong search team had been mobilised. They scoured the area, with the help of a helicopter, but the search yielded no results. At around 3pm on 18 March a member of the public stumbled upon a body wedged between rocks on Sheung Sze Wan beach, which was soon identified as that of Wing-chun. At the time of writing, an official cause of death has not been made public, but the assumption is that he died from drowning.<sup>1</sup> As tragic as it may be, Wing-chun’s death, taken in isolation, is not very remarkable. Accidents happen, and some of the hiking trails in Sai Kung are extremely challenging if not downright dangerous.

But scratch the surface and there are several things that don’t quite add up. Wing-chun was an experienced, well-prepared hiker familiar with the area, so probably wouldn’t be surprised by much. The last position indicated by his mobile phone signal was a place called Yuen Ng Fan, 6.02 miles (9.7km) away from where he was found – so how did he get from A to B?

Whatever fate befell him, it must have happened suddenly, leaving no opportunity to call for help. Given that the route between Yuen Ng Fan and Sheung Sze Wan is a rough horseshoe shape along coastal paths, it’s conceivable he may have fallen in the water and been carried by the current, but that seems just a little too neat and tidy. When he was found, he still had his backpack, phone, wallet, identity documents and other personal effects with him. If he’d been carried along by a current for more than six miles, wouldn’t some of his belongings have been lost along





**ABOVE:** The police search for Lam Wing-chun (inset), whose body was found on Sheung Sze Wan beach. **BELOW:** Hikers walk up a trail in Sai Kung Country Park.

the way? Anyway, how did the search teams fail to locate the body in what is a relatively small area?

Interestingly, one of the things that has drawn comparisons between Sai Kung and the Bermuda Triangle is the way that compasses, mobile phones, and other electronic devices seem to malfunction there, which could not only adversely affect hikers' equipment but also hinder search operations. Scholars who have analysed the area from a geological perspective have claimed that as a result of significant seismic disturbances in the past, up to 85 per cent of the land mass is now covered with volcanic rock.<sup>2</sup> It's said this magma has disrupted the natural magnetic field and can cause tourists to lose their bearings or even faint. This is the other, darker meaning of the term "Sai Kung enchantment".

If this is true, perhaps the effect on visitors might be more pronounced than on people native to the area who might have built up some sort of tolerance to changes in the magnetic field.

### THE VANISHING OF TING LI-WAH

I'd have less trouble believing what happened to Lam Wing-chun was just an unfortunate accident if this was an isolated incident. But it isn't. Things like this happen in Sai Kung with alarming regularity. By all accounts, there has always been something a bit sketchy about the place, but it didn't start making its mark in the public consciousness until 11 September 2005 when what is now seen as the area's most famous incident occurred.

At 1.30pm, off-duty policeman Ting Li-wah called emergency services and requested an ambulance. The 45-year-old said he did not know exactly where he was, only that his current location was a two-hour walk from Pak Tam Chung, a beauty spot in south Sai Kung. Hong Kong hiking trails have been numbered and signposted using the HK1980 coordinate system since



ALEX OGLE / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES





**ABOVE LEFT:** Information, maps and signage on one of Sai Kung's main hiking trails. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Distance posts with grid reference are provided for hikers' safety on trails, but they didn't seem to help Ting Li-wah, of whom no trace was ever found. **BELOW:** A number of hikers in Sai Kung have seemingly vanished.

the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> but when Li-wah was asked to give his coordinates the ones provided didn't correspond with the government registry. Even if injured or distressed, it's unthinkable that a trained police officer would make such a basic error. The call was then abruptly cut off, and despite an exhaustive search lasting five days and involving hundreds of personnel across multiple government agencies, no trace of Li-wah was ever found.

Li-wah was a member of the anti-triad squad, which might have something to do with his disappearance. But he wasn't very high ranking, so it would seem unlikely that the triads would go so far as to risk bumping him off – bribery is more their thing. Even if he was assassinated, it wouldn't explain the lack of a body or the confused phone call. The story made such an impact that in 2019 it was the inspiration behind a Chinese-language movie called (in English) *Missing*.<sup>4</sup> Described as a drama/thriller, the plot follows a social worker who goes in search of her father, who had disappeared in Sai Kung seven years earlier, when a hiker finds his police badge.

Less than a month later, on 4 October 2005, the body of another man was found in a wooded area near Lo Fu Kei Shek (aka Shek Uk San), at 1,578 feet (481m), the highest peak in Sai Kung. According to an article in the *South China Morning Post*,<sup>5</sup> the body was that of 22-year-old Yuen Chi-yung,<sup>6</sup> an experienced outdoorsman who had been leading a team of four female hikers as part of a training course. The hike was just 4.3 miles (7km) long and should have taken around three hours. However, shortly after their excursion began – coincidentally, or not, near where Li-wah had disappeared – Chi-yung said he felt unwell and stopped to rest, sending the rest of the team on ahead without him. When he failed to catch them up, the group reported him missing. It took a

## IF HE WAS IN DISTRESS, WHY DIDN'T HE TRY TO CALL FOR HELP?

200-strong search team three days to find his body, by which time he had been dead for “at least 24 hours”.

So what happened to him?

Police suspected he'd tripped and hit his head on some rocks. But, again, questions remain. Like Li-wah, Chi-yung was an experienced hiker and climber, and there's a near 36-hour disparity between when he was reported missing and his estimated time of death. What was he doing during that time? If he was in distress, why didn't he try to call for help? Furthermore, the place Chi-yung's body was eventually found was just metres away

from a route the search and rescue team, who were equipped with dogs and life detectors, took. How did they fail to locate him?

Then, in 2009, a 49-year-old bus driver called Zelong Huang vanished while out hiking. His family called his cell phone, which was picked up by a fisherman who said he'd found a bag containing the phone in the sea and repurposed the SIM card. When pressed for more information, he hung up. The authorities determined that the last place Zelong Huang used his phone was Big Wave Bay, but even after extensive searches lasting many days, he was never seen again and no body was ever found.

In 2019 yet another hiker, 45-year-old Xu Xinxian, went missing and was later found dead. This time, his death was ruled “suspicious”. The trend continued into 2020 when another man was found lying dead on a hiking trail. It was assumed he too had fallen and hit his head, in what would be almost an exact re-enactment of the Chi-yung case. Could it be a mere coincidence?





Sandwiched between these two events was the disappearance of a 64-year-old who went fishing alone on Nai Chung pier and vanished into thin air. It would be easy to assume he simply fell in the sea and drowned – but, again, what happened to the body?

There are several underlying patterns across many of these cases that could be indicative of a serial killer at work, not least all the ‘victims’ being of the same demographic. But could a serial killer really function undetected for such a prolonged period? Technological advances and modern policing techniques make it doubtful, but not impossible. Any public talk involving such a theory would probably be suppressed by the mainstream Chinese media, which heavily favours more positive, nationalistic stories. Even the (theoretically) free Hong Kong press abide by this ethos to a large extent in order to avoid the territory being seen in a negative light.

## ZHANG SHANPENG’S STORY

To understand more about what we might be dealing with, it’s worth looking outside the box and examining a few close calls. On 3 February 2019, the *DimSumDaily* briefly reported that two missing hikers had been found by police after an overnight search.<sup>7</sup> The brief article states that the duo were reported missing when a mutual friend realised they hadn’t returned home and both their phones were dead. They were located alive and well near Lai Chi Ching.

But wait a moment – both their phones had died? Sure, we all forget to charge our phones and unexpectedly run out of juice, usually at the most inconvenient times... but two people in the same place at the same time? In the age of battery packs and portable chargers, and when most young people would rather lose a limb than see their mobile phone run below 25%, this strikes me as extremely far-fetched. Unless, of course, some external force caused the phones to malfunction.

Stranger still is an incident that befell climber Zhang Shanpeng – and which could hold the key to the whole mystery. On 18 June 2016, he set off on a hike from Pak Tam Chung to Pak Tam Au. At around 10am he posted a selfie on Facebook<sup>8</sup> and added another message a few minutes later saying he thought it looked like rain. That was his last interaction, and his worried family contacted the authorities the next day. The initial search uncovered a blue sun visor similar to that worn by Zhang Shanpeng in his last selfie, but no trace of the man himself. Then the search range was expanded, helicopters were dispatched, and finally on 21 June, a team of police officers spotted a man on the Ham Tin Bay Highway. It turned out to be Zhang Shanpeng. And that’s when the weirdness started.

On 3 July, Zhang Shanpeng took to Facebook again to describe in detail what had happened to him while he was missing. The post said that on the first day, when the



ABOVE: Hiker Zhang Shanpeng posted this selfie to Facebook, before having some strange experiences.

BELOW: The poster for the Chinese film *Missing*, inspired by Ting Li-wah’s 2005 disappearance.



sky turned overcast, he had set out down the mountain, but that when he passed through a bush he suddenly lost consciousness. After waking up, he tried to continue his journey but found himself going around in circles and was forced to spend the night in the mountains.

Upon waking the next day, he tried again to find his way down the mountain. Seeing two travellers near a stream, he called out for help; they didn’t hear him, and when he approached them they suddenly disappeared. Tired and hungry, he passed out next to the stream, and when he woke up again was somehow in a completely different place. He walked near some woods until he found a cemetery. Not recognising the place, he panicked and fled. Shortly afterwards he again saw someone near a mountain stream, but when he tried to approach them, they also disappeared. When he woke on the fourth day, he found himself in another unfamiliar location. This time, he decided to climb to higher ground and was finally able to make his escape.

Public reaction to Zhang Shanpeng’s account was mixed. Some Internet commenters put his experiences down to hallucinations brought on by fatigue and dehydration, while others flatly accused him of being a fantasist. I don’t believe he made the whole thing up. After all, what would he stand to gain from doing so? The Chinese are very pragmatic by nature and wouldn’t willingly set themselves up for public ridicule. While the jury might still be out on exactly what happened, it’s clear that *something* happened to him during the four days he was missing. And if you believe this, you might argue that Zhang Shanpeng’s story is the perfect example of “Sai Kung enchantment” in action – and that he is simply one of the few people lucky enough to survive it.

## NOTES

- <https://hongkongbuzz.hk/2021/03/body-found-in-sheung-sze-wan-confirmed-as-missing-hiker>
- <https://min.news/en/travel/f19147d82414820f719c93e52e044fce.html>
- This system uses six digits to represent the horizontal and vertical coordinates of any given hiking trail, the aim being to stop people getting lost.
- [www.imdb.com/title/tt12043620/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt12043620/)
- [www.scmp.com/article/519107/hiker-gone-missing-sai-kung-found-dead](http://www.scmp.com/article/519107/hiker-gone-missing-sai-kung-found-dead)
- In some reports, the name given is Yuan Zhiyong, which appears to be a different Anglicisation of the same Chinese characters.
- [www.dimsumdaily.hk/two-hikers-who-went-missing-during-hiking-in-sai-kung-yesterday-finally-found-by-police/](http://www.dimsumdaily.hk/two-hikers-who-went-missing-during-hiking-in-sai-kung-yesterday-finally-found-by-police/)
- Facebook and most other Western social networking platforms are blocked in mainland China (where savvy netizens use VPNs to access them), but not in Hong Kong.

Translation & additional research by Xin Zhou, Yushan Liu and Liu Yiming.

❖ **CHRIS SAUNDERS**, who writes fiction as CM Saunders, is a freelance journalist and editor from south Wales. He has lived in China on and off for almost 15 years. His latest release is *Back from the Dead*, a collection of zombie-themed fiction.



# DR FELKIN & THE HOUSE OF THE SUN

**DEAN BALLINGER** tells the fascinating story of what happened when one faction of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn – the occult society whose members included Yeats and Aleister Crowley – packed up and moved to a small town in New Zealand.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, established in London in 1888, is arguably the best known group in the modern history of Western magic, a stature aided by famous members of the order such as the poet WB Yeats (see **FT165:48, 329:46-48**) and the occultist Aleister Crowley (see **FT231** and *passim*). While the heyday of the Golden Dawn was relatively brief, with personality conflicts and theoretical schisms leading to its rapid decline in the early 1900s, it had a substantial afterlife in a seemingly most unlikely setting: the small provincial New Zealand town of Havelock North. According to the American religious scholar Robert S Ellwood, who devoted a chapter to the subject in his excellent study *Islands of the Dawn: The Story of Alternative Spirituality in New Zealand* (1990), the Havelock North version of the Golden Dawn constituted the order's "second and greater incarnation", as it "possessed a finer temple, more members, and greater ritual finesse than the British model", as well as lasting much longer than the "faction-ridden" original. The story of the Golden Dawn down under combines colonial esotericism with one of the key members of the original Order: British doctor Robert Felkin.

## THE HAVELOCK WORK

Havelock North was founded by the New Zealand government in the 1860s, on the fertile Heretaunga Plains in the Hawke's Bay region on the south east coast of New Zealand's North Island. The plains were rapidly developed into one of the agricultural breadbaskets of the dominion, leading to the establishment of Havelock North as a township that supported a prosperous local population of gentlemen-farmers. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 800-plus population also included numerous prominent citizens interested in contemporary progressive thought. In 1906, New Zealander



**LEFT:** Dr Robert Felkin, who had enjoyed a life of adventure and magical intrigue before coming to New Zealand.

Stadacona, became the focal point for a salon of alternative-minded locals from Anglican and Quaker backgrounds. Calling themselves the Society of the Southern Cross, the group sought to realise social and spiritual progress in a manner inspired by contemporary cultural developments such as the Arts and Crafts movement in the UK. Alongside scions of prominent farming families, such as the Chambers and the McLeans, most members were involved in education and the arts, such as retired English teacher Mary Mitchell McLean (an in-law to the Chambers clan); Bessie Spencer, principal of the girls' high school in the regional city of Napier; and siblings Harold and Lille Large, actor and music teacher respectively. Bessie Spencer and the Large siblings were also active Theosophists, an influence which led the Society to develop a fascination with esoteric forms of Christian belief and practice.

This was exemplified by the spiritual trajectory of Harold Large. Introduced to Judaism and Buddhism via Theosophy, he came to the conclusion that "Eastern methods of [spiritual] training" were unsuitable for Westerners. These thoughts led him to leave the Theosophical Society and join the Anglican Church in the mid-1900s, shortly before becoming involved with the Stadacona milieu.

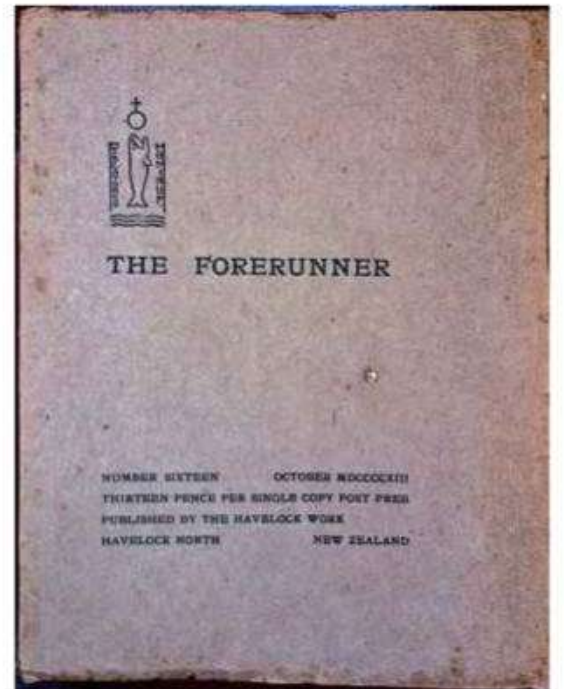
In keeping with contemporary international experiments with what are now labelled "intentional communities",<sup>1</sup> the Society decided to put their ideas into practice through a cultural movement that they labelled "The Havelock Work". After publicising the idea through a 1908 meeting in the nearby city of Hastings, realisation of the Work took three main forms: support for local arts and crafts production; pageants and other public events, including New

## THE OLD MAN MADE A SIGN LIKE A FLAME IN THE AIR BEFORE APPEARING TO VANISH

Reginald Gardiner and his wife Ruth, who had spent several years living in the latter's native Canada, settled in Havelock North to join Reginald's brother Allen, Reverend of St Luke's, the local Anglican church.

Over the next couple of years, while Reginald established himself as a regional businessman, the Gardiners' homestead,





ABOVE LEFT: St Luke's, Havelock North, photographed in the 1920s. ABOVE RIGHT: Issue 13 of *The Forerunner*. BELOW: The 1912 Shakespearean Pageant.

Zealand's first ever Shakespeare festival in 1912; and the publication of a journal called *The Forerunner*, which ran from 1907 to 1914. Alongside articles on such progressive topics as social welfare, environmentalism, and home design, *The Forerunner* also carried pieces on more outré subjects, such as mystical Christianity and the Society for Psychical Research. These were indicative of the esoteric agendas underlying the Work. As described by Reginald Gardiner, the Work was "a cultural society built around a silent power station", this power station being a metaphor for the core group – the "Inner Circle" – concerned with exploring the more mystical aspects of spiritual experience, especially those relating to the power of ritual. Such explorations were initially expressed through the appropriation of the Quaker tradition of the silent meeting, in which collective sessions of silent prayer and meditation (usually held in St Luke's) could generate a powerful atmosphere of spiritual contemplation.

In 1910, Father Charles Fitzgerald, a clergyman from a monastery in Mirfield, Yorkshire, operated by the Anglican Community of the Resurrection, journeyed to New Zealand as part of an Anglican 'Mission of Help' which involved work at various parishes around the country. Fitzgerald's Anglicanism was one that accommodated less conventional forms of spirituality, such as Theosophy and membership of the Golden Dawn offshoot the Order of the Stella Matutina. It was through such circles that Mary McLean had made his acquaintance during an earlier trip to the UK. In New Zealand, McLean arranged for Fitzgerald to visit Havelock North and observe the Work in action. Impressed by the Inner Circle's desire for more intensive mystical development, he agreed to aid this process by operating as a de facto leader, giving magical instruction via correspondence upon his return to England. As this arrangement quickly proved inadequate, Fitzgerald recommended enlisting his friend and mentor Dr Robert Felkin, the London-based head of the Stella Matutina, for the role.

### ENTER DR FELKIN

On first impression, Dr Robert Felkin – a professional man from a respectable background – might appear to be one of the "muddled middle-class mediocrities" Crowley sniffed at in his reminiscences of the Golden Dawn.<sup>2</sup> However, Felkin's life story of international adventure and magical intrigue bears comparison with Crowley's own, albeit of a much more positive nature. Felkin was born in 1853 into a family of Nottingham lace manufacturers. When the business collapsed, his father relocated to Wolverhampton and worked for a varnish company run by the Mander family. Felkin was raised in the Congregationalist faith of his mother, but, as he matured, rejected their "fire and brimstone" worldview for the more liberal tenets of Anglicanism. From 1870 Felkin worked for five years in his cousin's stocking factory in Germany, prior to embarking on a medical degree. A more esoteric spiritual path was revealed to him through an incident that occurred during this period. During an afternoon beer garden session, Felkin met a "mysterious old man" who informed him that he was being guided along a path of spiritual development by "those who see". The old

man made a sign like a flame in the air with his finger before departing so rapidly he appeared to vanish. Felkin later interpreted this as an encounter with an emissary of the Rosicrucians, and a sign that magic would play a major role in his destiny.

The famed Scottish Congregationalist doctor David Livingstone inspired Felkin to travel to Africa as a medical missionary during 1878-1880. There he won the respect of the Ugandan king Mutesa by curing his gonorrhoea with silver nitrate, as well as contracting the malaria from which he would suffer for the rest of his life. Felkin's contact with the "pagan" spiritualities of Africa, such as an encounter with a witch doctor who allegedly changed into a leopard, caused his inchoate spirituality to shift towards a more occult view of the world. Upon returning to the UK, Felkin married Mary Mander (daughter of the varnish magnate) in 1882, and began his professional career as an MD in Edinburgh in 1884. The couple had three children over the next few years: a daughter, Nora Ethelwyn, and two sons, Samuel Denys and Robert Laurence (Felkin tending to refer to his children by their middle, rather than first, names). Mary shared her hus-







**ABOVE LEFT:** New Zealand architect James Chapman-Taylor already had a deep interest in esoteric subjects when he was approached to build Whare Ra.  
**ABOVE RIGHT:** The Gardiners' homestead, Stadcona, as it looks today. **BELOW:** Harriot Felkin, Dr Felkin's second wife, would lead the group after his death.

band's interests in mysticism, allegedly to his detriment. It was later insinuated (by his second wife, Harriot) that Felkin's alcoholic tendencies could be largely attributed to Mary's putting otherworldly interests above housekeeping duties. Returning home after a hard day's rounds in miserable Scottish weather and finding no tea on the table, Felkin sought sustenance in liquor. Robert and Mary Felkin both joined the Theosophical Society in 1886, before enlisting in the Edinburgh branch of the Golden Dawn, the Amoun-Ra temple, in 1894.<sup>3</sup> A move to London in 1896 brought them into the fold of the central Golden Dawn temple, at that time dominated by the autocratic leadership of MacGregor Mathers. Within the Order, Felkin adopted the magical moniker "Finem Respice" or "have regard to the end", a motto that would prove prescient in relation to the culmination of his magical career in the later phases of his life.

The years 1902-1903 were significant for Felkin. The beginning of the new century had seen the Golden Dawn in disarray, due to factors such as the ousting of Mathers in late 1900 and the negative publicity resulting from the Horos trial in 1901 (in which a couple who had set themselves up as gurus, using Golden Dawn-style practices, were convicted on charges of rape and fraud). The result was the splintering of the Order into three main factions: the Alpha et Omega group under Mathers; the Independent and Rectified Rite of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn under AE Waite; and the Order of the Stella Matutina (Morning Star) under Felkin. The basis of Felkin's leadership of the Stella Matutina was complex, involving an alleged mandate from Rosicrucian chiefs in Europe along with psychic connections to the 'Sun Masters' and other magical adepts. These included an Arab called Ara Ben Shemesh, whom he would meet on the astral plane, and a more corporeal Hindu teacher named Sri Parananda. Felkin's description of meeting Parananda provides a good example

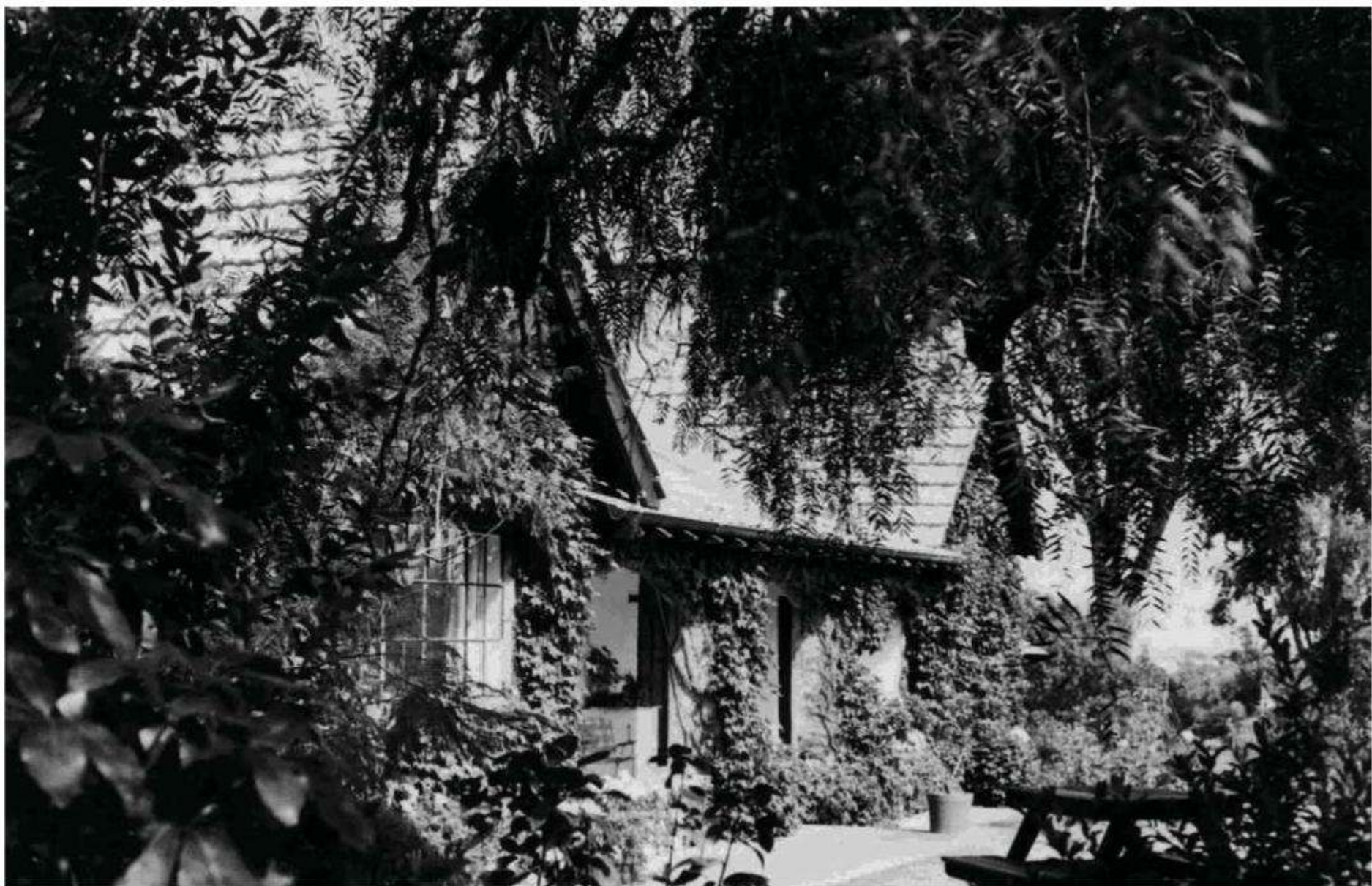


of the magical forces he believed guided his life. Relaxing in a German spa resort, he saw the figure of a bearded man of Eastern appearance, clad in cap and robes, materialise within the steam. The figure instructed Felkin to meet him in a month's time in the lounge of London's Carlton Hotel. Honouring the assignation, Felkin was initially dismayed at the absence of his mentor until he identified Parananda in the flesh, sans the beard and cap he had been sporting at the time of the vision. However, Felkin's rise through the Golden Dawn ranks was tragically checked by Mary's sudden demise from appendicitis in 1903. He went to recuperate from the shock on a retreat at the Anglican monastery in Mirfield, Yorkshire, where Father Charles Fitzgerald was based. Bonding over their mutual interests in occultism and esoteric Christianity, a friendship was forged that led Fitzgerald to recommend Felkin as spiritual advisor to the Inner Circle of the Havelock Work.

When he received the Inner Circle's proposal in 1912, Felkin was well established in London, both as a doctor and as head of the Stella Matutina, and had remarried. Harriot Felkin, aka 'Quæstor Lucis' (seeker of light),

shared her husband's magical interests and bolstered his authority through her own astral contacts with masters, adepts, and secret chiefs. The Felkin children also reached adulthood around this time, the effects of growing up in a 'magical family' manifesting in different ways. While Ethelwyn assisted her parents and became a key figure in the Stella Matutina, her rebellious brother Laurence at one point became an acolyte of Crowley in London and participated in Thelemic ceremonies, much to the consternation of his father who regarded Crowley as a black magician.<sup>4</sup> After consideration, the Felkins agreed to the proposal as it presented the opportunity for themselves to be magical "pioneers on virgin soil". In December 1912, Robert, Harriot, and Ethelwyn arrived in New Zealand for a three-month visit, their voyage paid for by the wealthy members of the Circle. Felkin was impressed by the New Zealanders' "natural psychic potential" and hunger for esoteric knowledge, and undertook three courses of action to facilitate the ongoing development of Havelock North as a magical centre after his return to the UK. The first was to give 12 members of the Work a crash course in Stella Matutina teachings, so that they would be able to pursue magic in a self-directed manner. The second was to establish official imprimatur for the Stella Matutina in Havelock North by founding the Smaragdum Thallasses (Emerald of the Sea) Lodge and Temple. The third was to set up a New Zealand branch of another occult organisation he was involved in, the Order of the Table Round. This was an obscure group that claimed to preserve a spiritual lineage of Christian chivalry from King Arthur through to the present. Felkin had been anointed the Grandmaster of the Order around 1910 by fellow mystic Neville Meakin, who asserted that his family line constituted the secret guardians of the Order. Childless and consumptive, Meakin ensured that Felkin would perpetuate the Order before his premature demise in 1912.





SUB ROSA PRESS NEW ZEALAND

ABOVE AND BELOW: Two views of Whare Ra – the front of the house seen from the north east (above) and the lower portal at the south-west corner (below).

## WHARE RA

The Chambers family bequeathed an undeveloped plot on the outskirts of Havelock North as a base for the Lodge, and Wellington-based architect James Chapman-Taylor was commissioned to construct a headquarters building on the site. A significant figure in New Zealand art history due to his distinctive ‘Arts and Crafts’ style houses and photographic output, Chapman-Taylor also had a profound interest in occult subjects such as astrology and Theosophy. Through his Theosophical contacts he had attended the 1908 Hastings meeting, becoming a member of the Inner Circle of the Work, and also made the acquaintance of the Felkins during a trip to the UK the following year.

The foundation stone for the HQ was consecrated by Felkin before his family returned to the UK in early 1913. What came to be known as Whare Ra, or the ‘House of the Sun’ in Maori, was built on the lip of a hill and constructed in the then-new material of reinforced concrete. An upstairs area, consisting of living quarters and offices, was connected via a stairwell to a basement temple built into the hillside. Initiates would enter the stairwell through a wardrobe and be ritually guided down into the main space of the temple, a large chamber replete with Chapman-Taylor designed furniture and props, such as an altar and two large wooden ‘Pillars of Hermes’. Connected to the chamber by two sets of heavy double doors was a vault for meditation and initiation, designed with seven walls in keeping with the alleged

## INITIATES WOULD BE RITUALLY GUIDED DOWN INTO THE MAIN SPACE OF THE TEMPLE



layout of the tomb of Christian Rosenkreutz, mythical founder of the Rosicrucians. Each wall represented one of the seven planets of Hermetic lore – Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Moon, Venus, Mercury, Sun – and was decorated with 40 squares upon which astrological, kabbalistic and tarot symbols were painted.

Whare Ra was to become the permanent residence of the Felkins on their emigration to Havelock North in 1916. Back in the UK after their initial visit down under, Robert and Harriot continued their quest to make contact with the secret order of Rosicrucian adepts whom they believed operated in Germany and were the original source of the antique magical ciphers that inspired the creation of the Golden Dawn, after being found and decoded by London coroner William Westcott in 1887. The Felkins had made prior trips to the Continent for similar purposes in 1906 and 1910: during the latter, Robert had met Rudolf Steiner (see FT205:44-51), whom he considered to be an adept and from whom he claimed to have received spiritual instruction. Their 1914 expedition was abruptly curtailed by the outbreak of WWI. Stranded in Germany as enemy aliens, the Felkins were helped by local Masons to reach neutral Holland and thence travel back to the UK. While contributing to the British war effort in the rather thankless role of an army sanitation inspector, Felkin received a petition from the Smaragdum Thallasses members, asking him to come and live permanently in Havelock North as their leader. Whare Ra would be provided as his residence, and he would be



## INTO THE VAULT

So what kind of magical activities took place in the House of the Sun? Felkin and most of the other Havelock North locals involved in Whare Ra were Anglicans who appear to have approached the Golden Dawn as a syncretic esoteric system that could accommodate their interests in cultivating a ritual-based Christian mysticism. It is therefore hard to imagine the upstanding burghers of Havelock North engaged in the ravishment of virgins or the Crowley-style consumption of semen-soaked communion wafers.

The Golden Dawn curriculum implemented and modified by Felkin involved diligent long-term study and instruction in magical theory, philosophy, and ritual practice, structured through grades organised at three hierarchical levels. The first level/Outer Order (grades 0-4) involved study of topics such as astrology, the Kabbalah, visualisation of thought forms through meditation and the basics of communication via the astral plane. Advanced theory and ritual practices were the focus of the second level/Inner Order (grades 5-7: this level is also known by the formal title ‘Rosea Rubra et Aurea Crucis’). The 7<sup>th</sup> grade was generally regarded as the highest to which most students could progress, the third level (Grades 8-10) being that reserved for ‘secret chiefs’ and other magical luminaries.

According to the research of New Zealand magician Patrick Zalewski, members of the Inner Order undertook rituals for contacting godforms, healing and exorcism, and instruction in using the Enochian system for divination and projection: among other things, this involved becoming proficient at playing “Enochian chess”. Other inner order activities, such as undertaking a “Ritual of Invisibility” and learning how to use magical “Swords, Lotus Wands, and elemental weapons”, are evocative of popular Harry Potter-esque conceptions of magic, while a patina of pagan nature worship is implicit in tasks such as “recording astral contact with at least 10 species of plant”.

The septagonal, elaborately decorated vault that today constitutes the most visible relic of Whare Ra had several profound applications. In the first years of the temple, students would spend a night alone in the candlelit vault as part of their initiation into the Inner Order. Within the Inner Order, the vault was used to develop skills in advanced practical magic. Individual students would prepare for tests in which they would undertake a variety of magical exercises to help focus their will upon one of the mystical symbols painted in squares on the walls. If successful, the symbol would allegedly become a “portal” of white light through which the initiate might be able “to communicate with and travel to the astral realm” in forms such as visions, voices, and out-of-body experiences.



guaranteed a good income as resident doctor for the township.<sup>5</sup>

The Smaragdum Thallases temple rapidly developed under Felkin’s ‘military’-style leadership, with the collective membership of the Order estimated as 300 at its peak in the early 1920s (200 in the Outer Order and 100 in the Inner Order) – a significant figure in relation to Havelock North’s small contemporary population of around 1,000 residents. However, not all the participants were locals: sources state that, at various times, the membership included national dignitaries such as generals, bishops, and Lord Jellicoe, Governor-General of New Zealand from 1920-1924. The administration of the temple was a family affair: as Golden Dawn protocol decreed each temple to be run by three ‘chiefs’, these roles were filled by Robert, Harriot, and Ethelwyn. The fact that most of the Inner Order were pillars of Havelock North society was useful in allaying public concerns about the Felkins’ ‘spiritualist’ activities. Robert S Ellwood recounts an anecdote about a new resident who asked the town board to investigate the sinister rumours surrounding the Felkins, unaware that most of the board members were also members of the temple. Needless to say, the ‘investigation’ found little ground for public concern. Felkin’s esoteric interests also influenced his medical practice, which incorporated a number of approaches that we would today term ‘alternative’. The Anthroposophical emphasis on the spiritual properties of colour inspired Felkin to experiment with colour therapy, extending Whare Ra with special ‘cells’ built for this purpose. He also claimed the ability to engage in acts of psychic healing, such as diagnosing illness through the power of touch, and, more provocatively, sending his “astral” to treat patients “at a distance”. These

healing abilities bore comparison with the powers attributed to *tohunga*, the shaman figures central to Maori society, whom Felkin acknowledged as “natural magicians”. Felkin’s reputation in these areas led to him gaining a clientele of patients from regional Maori communities, which bolstered his practice enough to warrant additional consulting rooms being added to Whare Ra.

## THE GOLDEN DUSK

The qualities of commitment and discipline that marked Felkin’s magical leadership ensured that Smaragdum Thallases ran relatively smoothly until his death in December 1926 at the age of 73, when he was buried in the ceremonial attire of a Knight of the Table Round. While Reginald Gardiner took Felkin’s place in the triad of chiefs, Harriot Felkin became the overall leader of the group. Despite deafness and other health issues, Harriot spent the next 30-odd years running the temple, which eventually came to be referred to generally as “Whare Ra”. From 1936 to 1949 she published a journal entitled *The Lantern*, which was significant for printing Felkin’s autobiography “A Wayfaring Man” in serial instalments, whence derives most of the information about his life. Harriot also engaged in extensive networking with other esoteric groups in New Zealand and abroad, resulting in the most tangible legacy of the Whare Ra order. In the late 1930s, having purportedly received “astral messages” that a “master” would appear to teach mystical wisdom in the antipodes, Harriot was informed that Australian anthroposophist Charles McDowell was also in receipt of these tidings. The pair formed an alliance to develop a “spiritual centre” for the master and his teachings, and to this end purchased a large block of land, dubbed Tauhara, near Lake Taupo in





**FACING PAGE AND LEFT:** The walls and ceiling of the Whare Ra vault. **BELOW:** The Felkin grave at Havelock North Cemetery, final resting place of Robert, Harriot and Ethelwyn.

Hawke's Bay regional museum in Napier. Accompanied by a detailed monograph by historian Georgina White, this has led to public radio and popular magazine features on the subject. As rediscoveries and re-evaluations of 20<sup>th</sup> century magic are major features of 21<sup>st</sup> century occulture (see, for example, **FT310:56-57**), such attention may signal the beginnings of a more substantive Whare Ra 'revival'.

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## NOTES

**1** As stated by Georgina White, notable examples from the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century that bear comparison with the Havelock Work include White-way, Leo Tolstoy's Cotswolds commune, and the Fellowship of the New Life, a London society set up by Scottish philosopher Thomas Davidson that spawned the highly influential socialist organisation The Fabian Society.

**2** Gary Lachman, *Aleister Crowley: Magick, Rock and Roll, and the Wickedest Man in the World*, Tarcher/Penguin 2014, p59.

**3** As with Crowley, Mathers and other occultists of this era, Felkin was keen on belonging to as many occult organisations as possible and on gaining status in each. For instance, in 1907 he became a Master Mason, which granted him membership in the British Masonic occult order the 'Societa Rosicruciana in Anglia'.

**4** The Crowleian dabbings of Felkin *films* feature in correspondence between Felkin and Waite in Oct 1912, documented online: [https://archive.org/stream/Ordo\\_Rr\\_Et\\_Ac\\_-\\_A\\_E\\_Waite/Ordo\\_Rr\\_Et\\_Ac\\_-\\_A\\_E\\_Waite\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/Ordo_Rr_Et_Ac_-_A_E_Waite/Ordo_Rr_Et_Ac_-_A_E_Waite_djvu.txt)

**5** Upon his departure Felkin appointed Christina Stoddart as one of the chiefs of the London temple. He subsequently had to deal long-distance with the decline of the temple, largely due to Stoddart developing the conspiracist belief that the Stella Matutina, and other esoteric orders such as Masonry, were part of an occult plot for world domination. Stoddart published two books, *Light Bearers of Darkness* (1930) and *Trail of the Serpent* (1936), that have been influential in shaping contemporary conspiracy theories fixated upon Masonry and magic.

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central North Island. Although the master failed to materialise, Tauhara is still in operation as a retreat and conference centre catering for spiritual groups of Eastern/New Age pedigree.

In 1959, both Harriot and Reginald Gardiner passed away at the age of 86, with Ethelwyn Felkin running Whare Ra until her own death, aged 79, three years later. The loss of these founding members precipitated major crises in the Order. In the early 1960s another Londoner, Charles Wren, emigrated to Havelock North and established his own 'Temple of the Sun' as an ostensible successor to Whare Ra. However, Order members disliked his personality and considered his rituals inferior to the Felkins' teachings: Wren's temple folded after only a few months. This same period saw another, more effective, challenge to the Order from the American esoteric group Builders Of The Adytum (BOTA). This organisation had been founded in 1938 by Paul Foster Case, an ex-member of the Golden Dawn who believed the Order's focus on ritual magic and psychic abilities was not only spiritually dangerous but peripheral to "real wisdom". In 1963 Ann Davies, the then-head of BOTA, toured New Zealand and addressed Whare Ra members at a meeting in Napier. While most members found her American brand of mysticism too

brash and overblown, an influential coterie left to establish and run a New Zealand chapter of the organisation.

The Smaragdum Thallasses temple continued to operate into the 1970s, becoming the last remnant of the original Golden Dawn organisation upon the cessation of the Hermes temple in Bristol in 1972. Generational attrition appears to have been the main impetus behind the closure of Whare Ra in August 1978: as Ellwood notes, the post-war counter-culture "generally lacked the patience, the studiousness, and the sense of importance of ritual and tradition" that had typified the spiritual questing of Felkin and his followers, preferring to glean such wisdom through the likes of the hippie 'happenings' held at Tauhara. However, those members of the Inner Order who were also initiated into the Order of the Table Round kept this latter group alive, into the 1990s at least.

A "code of silence" among elderly ex-members, in combination with perceptions of Havelock North as a sleepy country town, meant that until recently the story of Whare Ra remained little known outside of magical and academic circles. Popular awareness of the Order has developed over the last decade through reappraisals of Chapman-Taylor's artistic achievements, and a 2014 exhibition on Felkin and the Havelock Work at the MTG







## BURMA'S CONCRETE JUNGLE

**SD TUCKER** steers well clear of the Burmese junta's new purpose-built, occult architecture capital of Naypyidaw, largely because he doesn't want to get shot dead in the street like George Orwell's elephant.

Surely Burma's greatest linguistic gift to the world is the term "white elephant", meaning something that is of little use to man nor beast, yet still ruinously difficult and costly to maintain, a bit like Meghan Markle. In legend, Buddha's mother dreamed of just such an elephant entering her womb immediately prior to the baby godlet's conception, making the possession of similar rare albinos prized by Southeast Asian monarchs as signs of their divine Buddha-sanctioned right to rule. Thus, if a rival courtier or troublesome courtesan were ever to be gifted a pale pachyderm by the King, it could not be declined, being an ostensible sign of royal favour... whereas in truth the King aimed only to eat up his potential usurper's gold through looking after the useless creature, which could never be given away or used as a work-animal, being no beast of burden, just a burdensome beast. So revered were they that some were escorted everywhere by Buddhist priests, lulled to sleep by choirs singing hymns, and even suckled as calves by human women – you can see how they could easily bankrupt an owner. The term was popularised abroad by American carnival-barker PT Barnum, who acquired one at great expense, planning to bill it as "The Sacred White Elephant of Burma". When he actually got it, Barnum found it was really just dirty grey with roseate spots or "diseased blotches". Sadly, white elephants aren't truly white, but mottled pink, a genuine misnomer.

Naturally, today's Burmese absolute rulers in the astrology and magic-obsessed military junta (or *Tatmadaw*) which has governed the Buddhist nation for most of the 70-plus years since it gained its independence from the British Empire in 1948 possess several white elephants of their own, which are endlessly paraded on TV being showered with scented holy-water and chanted prayers to make the Generals' own reign seem whiter than white rather than blood-red. New elephants have a remarkable record of popping up just before elections, as in 2010 and 2015, suggesting the military keep a few hidden in reserve for as and when they are needed, with the animals hailed as living guarantees of peaceful "democratic transition" between one set of *Tatmadaw* puppet-politicians and another. In recent decades, Burma has accumulated a record number of albinos, which at first seems like



YE ALUNG THU / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

### BARNUM FOUND IT WAS DIRTY GREY WITH ROSEATE SPLOTCHES

a heavenly gift bestowed by Buddha – until you consider that rampant deforestation has simply flushed them out into the open, facilitating easy capture by government snatch-squads. Like Russian dolls, these white elephants now live safe and secure, guarded by policemen wielding assault-rifles, within another, even larger, white elephant of the concrete kind – Uppatasanti Pagoda, a golden temple-cum-zoo within the grounds of the junta's mega-costly purpose-built new capital of Naypyidaw. It's a wholly artificial city-state carved from the jungle interior and serves equally as fortress, royal city, three-dimensional propaganda symbol and extended exercise in occult architecture so mammoth in scale it would make even Nicholas Hawksmoor tremble. With the *Tatmadaw* seizing open power once again in the deadly coup of 1 February 2021, their impregnable elephant-sanctuary may yet prove its worth after all.<sup>1</sup>

ABOVE: White elephants – really a mottled pink – in Burma's capital Naypyidaw.

Most Westerners think Rangoon is still Burma's capital, so when we see protestors being shot there, we may think they are close to storming their sovereigns' palaces, but it is not so. Naypyidaw means "Abode of the King", a name revealed to the public on Armed Forces Day, 27 March 2006 (2+7=9 – as we saw last month, the auspicious numbers 9 and 11 are the Generals' lucky ones), construction only having begun in 2002 at a cost of around \$4 billion; slave-labour works fast, but perhaps not quite so cheaply as might be expected. Than Shwe, Burma's numerology-fixated dictator from 1992 to 2011, got the place off to a propitious start, evicting inconvenient villagers from their farms and 'offering' them new construction jobs. At 11am on 11 November 2005, 11,000 military trucks carrying 11 army battalions rumbled into Nyapyidaw from Rangoon, fresh from kidnapping civil servants from 11 different departments for forcible resettlement with no prior warning; their task was to ready things for the junta to move in later.<sup>2</sup> Six times bigger than New York, everything there is so jumbo-sized it really does seem designed for elephants, notably the 20-lane motorways, which, except when the Generals parade their tanks and motorcades down them, are virtually empty.



Allegedly, they are truly meant to serve as military airstrips for getaway planes (the *Tatmadaw*'s main ones being called White Elephant 1 & 2) in case of civil emergency. Supposedly, a million people live there, the majority being forcibly resettled admin staff, but the place is such a ghost-town that when *Top Gear* visited in 2014, they could safely play a game of football on the main road. As there seems nobody outside but street-cleaners, the showpiece capital is easy to maintain, with roundabouts in the shape of Buddhist lotus-flowers, well-tended roadside lawns and pastel-coloured dormitories all looking spotless but eerily empty. Constructed in separate regimented rectangular grids like an early *Sim City*, it has six basic zones with colour-coded roofs on the buildings to let (levitating?) citizens know which one they are in. These are separated by wide expanses of fields, artificial lakes, eco-parks and golf-courses, all linked by those Ballardian highways. If you were indeed playing *Sim City Burma*, you might notice something odd about the floor plans of government buildings viewed, god-like, from above; many are identical. Broadly cruciform, they have square brackets extending at right-angles from the crosses' arms, in a way that resembles the claws of a pixellated 8-bit scorpion. Burmese villages often erect large model scorpions to ward off evil spirits. But which malign ghosts would the junta fear?

## HEX AND THE CITY

A city with no history can have no ghosts, but a storied place like Rangoon is different. In 1996, the Generals authorised the digging up of Kyandaw Cemetery there, apparently to sell the land to a favoured drug lord; the families of the dead had to pay the excavation costs. Two years later, on the



ABOVE: Ballardian vistas; an empty 20-lane motorway in Naypyitaw. BELOW: Monks visit the Uppatasanti pagoda.

10th anniversary of a 1988 rebellion, at a spot where 80 or so student protestors had been slain by security forces, poltergeists appeared in buildings next to the cemetery in Myinegone Junction. What began with a local resident being hounded out of his haunted apartment by floating cups and dishes soon ballooned into a full-blown urban panic, with tales of writing and images appearing on the walls of a nearby tearoom, and reported sounds of marching, screams, voices and moans coming from thin air drawing curious crowds whose wild gossip began to present a potential security risk. In the Golden Land electronics store, polts started throwing stones and levitating TVs, one of which began broadcasting an unscheduled image of the innocent blood

spilled back in 1988. Regime media quietly ignored the event, but thousands turned up anyway, saying the Generals had angered the dead by denying the murdered students and exhumed corpses a proper burial – opinions for which some loose-tongued onlookers were arrested. A junta officer goose-stepped to the scene to read out an official dismissal notice, relieving the spooks “from their duties on Earth” in a clipped military exorcism. Rangoon means “the end of strife”, but at Myinegone Junction, such emotions now appear perpetually embedded within an asphalt Stone Tape.

Burmese polts are somewhat coterminous with ‘Nats’, native pre-Buddhist deities who died a ‘green’ or untimely death – a bit like the youthful ‘green’ students who perished at the hands of the junta. Nats are worshipped nationally in the lunar month of *Natdaw* (November-December), so to have them turn against you is a real PR disaster. When early Buddhist kings failed to stamp out Nat worship, they co-opted them instead, instituting an official pantheon of 37 main Nats and relabelling each as a deceased member of the royal line, spiritual guarantors of dynastic stability. One such Royal Nat, King Thihathu of Ava, gained a new post-mortem Nat name meaning ‘Lord of the White Elephant’, and is depicted as riding one in Burmese religious iconography. Yet the precise identities of these Nats could change to reflect new regnal needs; if a young prince claims one of the 37 Nats was really his own direct grandfather, setting up his golden statue in the Hall of the Ancestors to push out one of the old 37 spirits, he sets himself up as a future Royal Nat too. Anyone wishing him to suffer a ‘green death’ might thus be put off by the prospect of his ghostly revenge, once dead and deified: angry Nats







could curse an entire country or city, as at Myingone Junction. In Naypyidaw, giant statues of the three greatest ancient Burmese kings line the main military parade ground, one of them being King Anawrahta, who created the whole fake propaganda pantheon of the 37 Royal Nats in the first place. In Burma, today's kings are tomorrow's gods; and today's kings are the junta's Generals, so don't cross the *Tatmadaw* unless you want to face a green death yourself. <sup>3</sup>

## BULLETPROOF MONKS

Naypyidaw is not only a royal city, but a Buddhist one too. Traditionally, Burmese kings consecrated their capitals by building both a palace and a pagoda, signifying mastery over Earth and Heaven alike. The Generals' own palace is the *Hluttaw*, or Union Parliament, which combines Albert Speer-style monumental proportions and classical religious architecture. The complex has 31 buildings, equating to Buddhism's 31 planes of existence, its main entrance faces East towards the rising Sun, and it has tiered roof tiles, or *pyatthat*, customarily indicating the presence of either royalty or idols of the Buddha. The accompanying pagoda is Uppatasanti, home of the white elephants, opened by Than Shwe as a copy of Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda, previously the holiest national site. Oddly, it is 30cm (12in) smaller than its rival – but only so it can be precisely 99m tall (9x11=99). Within is enshrined a holy relic, purportedly the tooth of Buddha himself, bought by Than Shwe from a Chinese monastery, possession of which is also supposed to indicate a king's divine fitness to rule. King Anawrahta had repeatedly tried and failed to obtain this relic, but now, 1,000 years later, his rightful successor General Shwe had succeeded where Anawrahta had not. <sup>4</sup> Moreover, the State Seal of Burma under *Tatmadaw* rule from 1989-2011 was a map of the nation guarded by two Chinthes, mythical variants of the lion which stand to real ones as dragons stand to lizards. Similar leonine statues also perch as spiritual sentinels outside many of Burma's other Buddhist pagodas, making the Generals those same fierce Chinthes in human form.

Such symbolism is essential, as politically-minded Buddhist monks, or *pongyis*, are Burma's main plausible alternative power-base. The leading rebels against British rule were orange-robed militant monks, notably during the 'Shoe Question' episode of 1901-19, when Europeans caused outrage



LEFT: Helicopters fly over Naypyidaw's military parade ground, watched by statues of the three greatest Burmese kings, on 71st Armed Forces Day in 2016.

FACING PAGE: The unfortunate Toung-Taloung.

false rape claims against local Muslims; this led to deadly anti-Islamic riots, rather than anti-military ones. During the 1988 student rebellions, *Protocols of the Elders of Mecca*-style pamphlets also mysteriously began appearing, accusing Muslims of planning to steal all the Buddhists' land, property and women.

by refusing to remove their footwear when entering temples, and the Saya San rebellion of 1930-32, when the rebel ex-monk and self-styled "prophet-king" San turned tattooist, inking his own personal monk-army with magical images intended to attract aid from flying tigers and winged spears and to repel British bullets, with predictable results. Post-war Burmese rulers tried to claim Karl Marx was a secret Buddhist, then turned away from dialectical materialism and argued Buddhism was Burma's only anti-materialist defence against it, but Burma's priests still proved troublesome. There may be 400,000 monks in Burma today, who act as an alternative welfare state in the absence of any decent government one; in the aftermath of 2008's Cyclone Nargis, which killed 140,000 people, it was only monastic charity that prevented an even greater death-toll. Critical *pongyis* can be libelled as Drunken Masters, cannibal-killers or sex-fiends, but when in 2007 footage emerged of police beating monks, an attempted 'Saffron Revolution' led by 80,000 orange clerics took place. The Generals now saw the need to co-opt as many monks as possible, bribing some with cash, cars and TVs, or building special monk-only hospitals; even better was to allow them free reign to persecute the nation's minority Rohingya Muslim population, whom some accuse of plotting a demographic out-breeding programme of 'love-jihad'. From 2016, ultra-nationalist monk-led bodies and their military funders colluded in genocide, gang-raping, murdering and burning alive thousands of Rohingya, ethnically cleansing the nation of over a million refugees. In return, the extremist abbots order all good Buddhists to vote for *Tatmadaw* puppets, and condemn the opposition as tools of Islam. When in 1997 a Buddha statue had a 'magic gem' stolen from its belly by corrupt soldiers in Mandalay, anger was handily deflected by a Buddhist woman making

Yet many alleged "bogus monks" resist and threaten junta members with excommunication, turning their alms bowls upside-down to signify refusal of *Tatmadaw* bribes. The most incorruptible abbot of all was Thamanya Sayadaw, a saintly figure who ran a renowned mountain commune, doling out aid and protecting displaced persons, of whom Burma now has many. He was too widely revered to jail, so the junta tried to co-opt him; but he reputedly used his psychic powers to make visiting Generals' cars fail and bravely supported the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi instead, visiting her under house arrest using his astral body. After death, his more tangible body was stolen by armed men in a truck, before being burnt to ashes in a ritual of *yadaya-chae*, or Burmese black magic. The body-snatch occurred prior to a constitutional referendum, surprisingly set for 10 May 2008, or 5/10/2008. 16 is an unlucky digit in Burma – 5+1+0+2+0+0+8=16 – meaning the military had to perform *yadaya* sacrilege to win the vote. Expecting to lose, their supposed gambit was to choose a dark date which guaranteed this, then to flip their fortune back around by incinerating the abbot. <sup>5</sup>

## BIG BUDDHA IS WATCHING YOU

Naypyidaw could aptly be described as 'Orwellian', which is fitting as George Orwell himself served as a colonial era policeman in Moulmein, Lower Burma, in the 1920s, where he learned both to hate the Empire and to put a bullet through a troublesome elephant's brain, as detailed in his celebrated 1936 essay *Shooting an Elephant*. By the time he left his *Burmese Days* behind in 1927, Orwell had acquired native tattoos on his knuckles, "blue spots the size of small grapefruits", akin to those magical ones later used in the Saya San rebellion, an apparent mini-rebellion of his own against British rule. Orwell shot the elephant after it fled its



*mahout* and went on the rampage, trampling a local to death. It had calmed down by the time he found it, but the trailing Burmese throng still expected him to pull the trigger, so he did, causing a sudden revelation: “Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece. But in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a *sahib*.”<sup>6</sup> Today’s anti-junta protestors must hope the bullet-spraying hollow men among the regime’s snipers eventually experience some similar collective epiphany for themselves.

One analysis deems Orwellian Naypyidaw “both a bunker and a billboard”.

Undoubtedly a symbolic city, beneath its spiritual layout hides a competing military one. US diplomats thought its construction a sign of “dementia” on General Shwe’s part, yet by choosing a site to redevelop in the centre of the nation he avoided the prospect of invasion from the sea, either by amphibious troops or future cyclones. The official reason for moving from Rangoon was that it was too overcrowded, but the real motivation was memories of previous uprisings there, when the city’s urban geography had been used against the junta. Narrow British-era roads were easily blockaded by protestors, as can be seen in footage of new protests in 2021. But in Naypyidaw, there are only wide-open spaces



with nowhere for rebels to hide; a single soldier with a machine-gun could mow down dozens before the huge motorways could even be half blocked. The *Hluttaw* parliament complex even has a dry moat running around it, which may not be wholly decorative. That it is the only place in Burma with genuinely reliable electricity and wi-fi gives the soldiers another advantage. The Semi-Forbidden City is also difficult to reach, being placed in the middle of the jungle. The only access-route is the so-called ‘Death Highway’, a 300km (186m) accident blackspot leading north from Rangoon, which could easily be shut off by tanks or helicopters if need be – the opposite of Kipling’s more hospitable *Road to Mandalay*, the old, pre-colonial royal capital. Burmese kings once made a habit of establishing their citadels from near-scratch, appending the term ‘Naypyidaw’ at the end as a regal seal of approval, like our Bognor Regis. By letting the suffix stand alone this time, the Generals indicate this latest Royal City is meant to be the ultimate one, built to last forever – or, at least, until all those albino elephants expire.

If the Generals know their history, letting their pale, ghostly elephantoms

pack their trunks is as unwise as allowing the Tower of London’s ravens to fly away. When, in 1883, PT Barnum agreed to pay the modern equivalent of \$1 million to a Siamese nobleman for a white elephant, it was poisoned prior to export abroad by Buddhist priests appalled at its capture by heathens. King Thibaw Min of Burma now opportunistically, if impiously, sold Barnum another pinkish one, named Toung-Taloung, for twice the price. It arrived in 1884, accompanied by a full native orchestra and retinue of priests, but proved a flop with the public, who could see pink elephants any day they liked simply by drinking more gin. The unprofitable Toung-Taloung died in a fire in Bridgeport, Connecticut,<sup>7</sup> in 1887, although the cynical Barnum said “I can’t say I grieved much over his loss.” King Min did, though. In 1885, two years after he had sold his sacred beast, Britain won the Third Anglo-Burmese War, Mandalay fell, and Burma was fully subsumed into Victoria’s Empire, with Min becoming the nation’s final ruling monarch. And when, two years later, Toung-Taloung burned to death, it looked uncannily like suicide; although more than once rescued from the flames, he kept rushing back into them in an apparent attempt at interspecies *suttee*, to join his true owner in the afterlife.<sup>8</sup> If Burma’s rebels really want to depose the *Tatmadaw*, they could do worse than imitate Orwell and gun down their prized pets, making General Shwe’s Naypyidaw crumble like King Min’s Mandalay once did. \$4 billion would be an awful lot to have paid for an elephants’ graveyard.

## NOTES

General sources about Naypyidaw: *Times*, 17 Nov 2014; <https://averyreview.com/issues/24/auspicious-urbanisms/>; [www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/19/burmas-capital-naypyidaw-post-apocalypse-suburbia-highways-wifi](http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/19/burmas-capital-naypyidaw-post-apocalypse-suburbia-highways-wifi); [www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=5147](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=5147); [www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=6371&page=1](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=6371&page=1); <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naypyidaw>.

<sup>1</sup> [www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=393](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=393); [http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5\\_5c/entry-3-37.html](http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5c/entry-3-37.html); [www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/07/01/why\\_burma\\_believes\\_in\\_white\\_elephants\\_the\\_real\\_ones.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/07/01/why_burma_believes_in_white_elephants_the_real_ones.html); [www.thephuketnews.com/phuket-myanmar-finds-rare-white-elephant-state-media-51225.php](http://www.thephuketnews.com/phuket-myanmar-finds-rare-white-elephant-state-media-51225.php); [www.irishexaminer.com/world/arid-30478749.html](http://www.irishexaminer.com/world/arid-30478749.html); <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10452174>.

<sup>2</sup> The convoy set out from Rangoon at 6.37am, a time determined by

regime astrologers; either that, or it’s easier to shove thousands of Sir Humphreys into the back of a truck with no resistance when they’re still half-asleep. Six main zones, and the announcement of the place’s name in 2006, prior to its first major military parade on 6 November, do suggest a rival lucky number to 11 and 9 in Naypyidaw.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule*, Zed Books, 2001, p.230; [www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199806/msg00441.html](http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199806/msg00441.html); <https://web.archive.org/web/20121203160532/http://www.tuninst.net/Myanmar/Nat-worship/nat-in-classroom/nat-in-classroom.htm>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat\\_\(deity\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat_(deity))

<sup>4</sup> [www.irrawaddy.com/features/naypyidaws-synthetic-shwedagon-shimmers-solitude.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/features/naypyidaws-synthetic-shwedagon-shimmers-solitude.html); [www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/roots-of-power-the-long-journey-of-buddhas-tooth/89012](http://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/roots-of-power-the-long-journey-of-buddhas-tooth/89012). There are plenty such false teeth in the pagodas of Asia, akin to all those relics of the ‘true’ cross in European

cathedrals. There are legends of these miraculous dentures being burned by Hindu kings or ground to pieces by Catholic bishops, but magically escaping and regenerating again within the blooms of giant, light-emitting Buddhist lotus-flowers. Communist China has repeatedly lent Burma its own holy molars as a form of diplomacy, and when in 1996 two bombs went off outside a pagoda holding one, the junta were quick to blame student terrorists – but some saw only evidence of a military false-flag operation intended to justify yet more repression.

<sup>5</sup> Fink, 2001, pp.213-33; [www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/22/resistance-monks/buddhism-and-activism-burma](http://www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/22/resistance-monks/buddhism-and-activism-burma); [www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ba-tha-necessity-military.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ba-tha-necessity-military.html); [www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=12596](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=12596); <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/saffron-revolution-good-monk-myth/541116/>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-34463455>. Rival suspects were the other mountain monks themselves, who wanted rid of

the dead holy man’s body from its glass display case as, unlike many incorruptible monks’ miraculously preserved corpses, it had begun to rot and stink.

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, 2001, p.95; Lisa Mullen, “Orwell’s Tattoos: Skin, Guilt and Magic in *Shooting an Elephant*” (online at [www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/7/4/124/htm](http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/7/4/124/htm)). Some scholars question whether Orwell ever actually shot an elephant at all, or just made it up to sell an article. When challenged, his widow Sonia disagreed: “Of course he shot a fucking elephant. He said so, didn’t he?”

<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, a place also later haunted by a famous 1970s poltergeist which, like the 1998 Rangoon spooks, caused a TV to levitate – was it King Min’s Royal Nat, still angry about the fate of poor Toung-Taloung?

<sup>8</sup> <https://otisstories.wordpress.com/2011/05/31/a-white-elephant-in-america/>



THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS

# BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

NO 60. WHAT A NIGHT IT WAS! IT REALLY WAS SUCH A NIGHT!

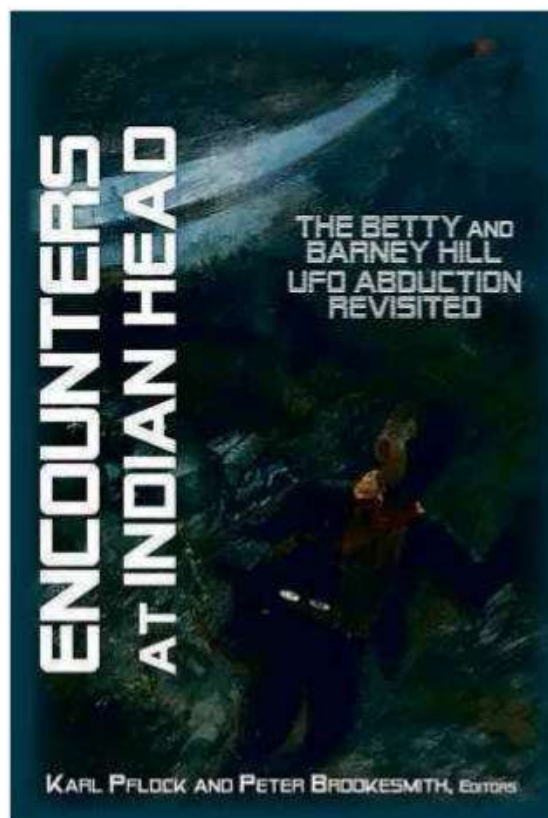
The New England leaves were just beginning to turn red and gold in the early autumn of 2000 when nine disparate characters arrived for a long weekend together at the Indian Head resort in New Hampshire (see FT225:39). They were gathering to discuss, in secret, the seminal, alleged abduction by aliens of Betty and Barney Hill that had occurred nearby in September 1961 (see FT110:28-31, 195:24, 262:48-50, 276:30, 296:72-73, 299:24, 302:69, 384:44-47). They wine and dined Betty that night, and the following day went with her to what she and Barney had decided was the aliens' landing site. Then they presented their papers, in the company of Joe Firmage, who funded the venture, and the discussions began. And seven years later, when – amazingly – still no one had let the secret out, those papers were published...

Edited by ufologists Karl Pflock and Peter Brookesmith, *Encounters at Indian Head* dissects, from nine different angles, the Hills' experience all those years before. The main text consists of seven chapters each based on a paper delivered at the symposium, along with additional chapters written by Walter N Webb (the original investigator of the case) and Martin S Kottmeyer, who although invited, were unable to attend in person. Pflock and Brookesmith did attend – indeed they organised the event – and contributed to it.

In a preface, the editors summarise the origins and development of the symposium and reflect upon what they felt it had achieved. They also reveal their preferred epistemological approach to the Hills' case and ufology generally: "From whatever angle (and with whatever predisposition) one comes at the case, it probably will not be resolved in favour of any one approach without our knowing a great deal more than we do about the Hills ... Some of us have long argued that knowledge – deep and broad – of the protagonist(s) in the great majority of UFO reports, and in *any* abduction account, is fundamental to making a fair evaluation." This approach is evident throughout the book; contributors avoid the banalities born of simplistic literalism, and they insist on a psychological and cultural dimension in their analyses of the Hills' account.

A section containing handy maps, diagrams and photographs taken during the symposium follows. This introduces the Hills' case, which is then elaborated in the opening chapter by Dennis Stacy.

Stacy presents a readable account of the Hills' abduction and its years-long



aftermath. He draws upon several sources, including John G Fuller's 1966 book, *The Interrupted Journey*, and treats them critically. From them, Stacy constructs a skilful commentary that provides readers with both an outline of the case and an appreciation of some of the perplexing difficulties it involves. It essentially falls into three parts: first, sighting a light in the sky, which seemed to follow them down Route 3 to Indian Head, where it apparently landed and at one point crossed the highway, allowing Barney to discern various figures on board through his binoculars. Alarmed, the Hills drove on, certain that the UFO was still tracking them. On a minor road that Barney took in error, figures standing in front of a

craft blocked their way, and they were taken aboard and separated. After medical examinations *et cetera*, they were allowed to go on their way, apparently in a trance; a series of beeping noises brought them round, and they continued home, arriving two hours later than they had estimated. Incidentally, none of those at the symposium had a ready explanation for the initial close encounter, although others believe they have resolved it since.

In the next chapter, Marcello Truzzi, who chaired the symposium, examines studies of anomalous phenomena from a social-scientific perspective. He employs the hermeneutic convention of setting the case in a lightly sketched historical context. Truzzi then conducts a scholarly analysis of some key aspects of the case and concludes that the Hills' account of their abduction does not hold up well under a critical gaze.

If Truzzi's analysis has a flaw, it lies in his critical strategy. Early in the chapter, he sets out six "pertinent background issues" that he feels are necessary to explore in order to bring the Hills' case "into bolder relief". He uses these as analytic bases to dissect the story, each occupying a section in the chapter. However, Truzzi does not declare *why* he chose these particular issues and not others as a framework for his discussion (which is odd, almost blasphemous, for an academic). Consequently, the underlying logic of his exposition remains unclear, although the exposition itself is logical enough.

Truzzi's erudition is impressive. He applies conceptual analysis at the highest levels of abstraction to the Hills' story without becoming obscure. Indeed, his evaluation of the case indicates the value of a conceptual psychosocial approach to alien abduction accounts.

In Chapter Three, Thomas "Ed" Bullard employs an empirical approach to evaluate the Hills' story. He gives a brief history of alien abduction accounts and then looks at their similarities and differences. He presents numerical tables to demonstrate how they show distinct patterns of detail. Bullard then concludes that these patterns do not prove that alien abductions are physical events – they are, besides, based on very small samples – although between the lines one can detect a hankering for such a proof. Rather, he says, "some consistent



experiential phenomenon underpins them” – in other words, there is at least a degree of objective reality to them. He suggests that the psychosocial dimension to alien encounter narratives is linked to a mythmaking propensity in human beings. This is something of a retreat from his original proposition in *The Measure of a Mystery* (1987), that the consistency of the accounts, such as it is, itself is a sure indication of their veridicality.

In the following chapter, Hilary Evans broadens the field of analysis to consider dreams – in particular the series of dreams Betty had after the abduction, on which her testimony under hypnosis seems to be based – and a variety of encounters with sundry otherworldly beings, notably visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. His conclusion enlarges that given by Bullard. Extraordinary encounters, including the Hills’, suggest that “there exists in every one of us a faculty for mythmaking – that is, combining material derived from the individual’s cultural framework with other material with personal content, to create an authorised yet made-to-measure myth.”

In Chapter Five, Peter Brookesmith explores the purpose of myth and its utility for understanding ufology generally. He proceeds with penetrating analytic confidence and refers to the Eden myth to make the perceptive point that it is a “metaphor for human development”. Brookesmith might have developed this illustration and used it to analyse the Hills’ case. A large body of literature suggests the Eden myth also signifies the birth of consciousness from the unconscious. In myth (as in dreams) the unconscious is not only symbolised as a primordial garden, but also as a place of encounters with that which is totally alien: states of enchantment, the Bogeyman, the Land of Faerie and its changelings. All this would have been grist to Brookesmith’s mill. But he had other things to consider in what is already one of the longest chapters in the book: in particular demonstrating how easy it is to show that there most likely was no ‘missing time’ in the Hills’ journey from Montreal to Portsmouth.

Brookesmith succeeds brilliantly in his quest. Drawing on seminal sources from several disciplines, he conducts a skilful postmortem of the Hills’ story. Despite his analytic discernment (and perhaps, because of it), his conclusions are restrained. When the tangled nature of the Hills’ story, with its elements of distinctiveness, fabulation, omissions, contradictions, cultural borrowings, professional errors and media hype are considered, the only conclusion the rational observer can make is that a water-



LEFT: The Indian Head participants: (l-r) Marcello Truzzi, Peter Brookesmith, Greg Sandow, Dennis Stacy, Karl Pflock, Thomas Bullard, Robert Sheaffer, Hilary Evans.

In due course he wrote a long piece on the meeting for *International UFO Reporter*.)

Chapter Eight by Walter N Webb and the Appendix by Martin S Kottmeyer offer concluding remarks about the case by focusing on different aspects of it. Webb reflects upon the interviews he made with the Hills some 40 years earlier and subsequent private correspondence with Betty. His commentary resembles the contents of the earlier

chapters in the book in that it plays with inconsistencies, specific possibilities and the findings of professional investigators. He concludes that the Hills’ case, and UFO phenomena generally, should be taken seriously by the scientific community as they point to “a totally unique phenomenon indicative of intelligent activity”.

Kottmeyer’s Appendix takes an opposing view and promotes a psychosocial account of the Hill’s case. His commentary proceeds nimbly but then becomes rather prickly when he seeks redress for critical comments about his work made elsewhere by Jerome Clark, Greg Sandow, and others. He sees this defence (which is undoubtedly justified) as central to maintaining and developing his thesis, but its disputatious emphasis is a tad deadening.

Both Webb and Kottmeyer leave the reader in no doubt that the Hill case remains a tangled, inconsistent, but beguiling mystery. Indeed, this is the general message of the book. It addresses a fascinating and, at the same time, disturbing account of alien abduction to assess its veracity. In the process, it throws light on similar accounts of abduction and associated ufolore. It is also extremely readable and provides both newcomers and old hands at ufology with an honest, intelligent and insightful foray into realms beyond our imagining, from commentators who do not by any means always agree on everything. Readers without a thesis to defend will be left with a firm indication that there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, to resurrect the old Shakespearean chestnut. That in itself merits high commendation, even apart from the careful integrity of the book. Taken as a whole it is the best account of the Hill case yet written, and deserves a place on every fortean’s bookshelf.

Karl T Pflock & Peter Brookesmith (editors), *Encounters at Indian Head*, Anomalist Books 2007.

“SOME STORIES  
HAVE TO BE WRITTEN  
BECAUSE NO ONE  
WOULD BELIEVE THE  
ABSURDITY OF IT  
ALL.”

*Shannon L Alder*

and fire-proof conclusion is out of reach. Only conjecture can obtain. Nevertheless, as he says, theirs is a myth that will not die.

Robert Sheaffer continues with a sceptical, forensic analysis of the case in Chapter Six. He does so by carefully applying reason – and a well-stropped Occam’s Razor – to examine details of accounts and reportage from several sources, and concludes firmly that the Hills’ encounter had psychological and not natural origins.

In Chapter Seven, Karl Pflock offers an opposing perspective. While he believes the Hills’ account can only be the subject of conjecture, he also demonstrates with sharp conviction that there are elements of it that cannot be so easily dismissed; for instance he finds no difficulty in defending the ‘missing time’ element in the Hills’ journey, and his preferred conclusion is that the Hills really *were* abducted that night. He also readily admits that he cannot prove this proposition. Pflock’s contribution is welcome. His analysis is plausible, and his commentary complements the general tenor of the book without undermining it. (This is perhaps the place to mention that Pflock was not alone among the gathering in his belief that the Hills were indeed abducted: also present was composer, critic and ufological ‘believer’ Greg Sandow, who contributed much to the discussions, but not to the book.



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Gloria's stall helps her pay for her children's education



Raised: £265.00  
Needed: £622.10

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Vor Thoun's farm will provide jobs for her local community



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## The world's worst smell

**IAN SIMMONS** sniffs out the world's most putrid pongs and offensive odours – but which is the worst of all?

In 2013 a waste disposal company carried out a survey to discover the British public's top ten worst smells, the results included baby poo, sewers on a hot day, bad breath, wet dog, rotten food and the “juice” at the bottom of your bin. Elsewhere decaying turtles, vulture vomit and weasel anal gland contents have been put forward as strong candidates and FT has regularly featured incidents involving the bracing odour of the durian fruit, but none of these come even close to the worst smell ever discovered.

Prankster Allen Wittman attempted to make the worst smell ever with a home chemistry set. After he and a friend were laid off work, they took revenge by leaving a few drops of the substance in the company break room. On learning that the organisation had subsequently gutted the room, replacing appliances, pipes and carpet in a vain attempt to expunge the stink, described as “butt crack, kind of a sewer smell with a hint of dead animal”, they saw a commercial opportunity and marketed the substance, now called Liquid ASS, as a joke product. Their publicity states:

“We package Liquid ASS in a bottle small enough to hide in the palm of your hand. The bottle dispenses our nasty elixir in a thin, invisible, silent stream, thus equipping the prankster with stealth and speed. These characteristics of Liquid ASS make it the perfect practical joke product.” How true that is probably depends on your sense of humour and which end of the stream you find yourself



*“An odour problem beyond our worst expectations”*

on. The US military really liked it, though; they have adopted it for use in training field medics, where it is used to simulate the smell caused by injuries involving a tear in the intestine that result in waste leaking into the abdominal cavity.

The US military have form with evil smells, though; they thought they had nailed it with a substance known as ‘US Government Standard Bathroom Malodor’. This was synthesised to produce a standardised evil stench that simulated that of field latrines in order to test cleaning products – but it was so promising that they then attempted to weaponise it, commissioning Pamela Dalton, a cognitive psychologist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, to develop a non-lethal stench weapon that could be used in the field. She found that there was almost no universal consensus on what actually smelt bad – it depended on people’s cultural background – but pretty much everyone agreed that Standard Bathroom Malodor

was exceptionally foul. As a result, Dalton combined it with a number of other chemicals – including those that give rotting corpses their distinctive smell, plus sulphur and a sweet, fruity overtone – to develop a liquid known as “Stench Soup” that could be used as an area denial weapon. The result has been described as something that “smells something like a putrescent corpse lying on a mound of human excrement laced with rotten eggs and overripe fruit. Only worse”, and “Satan on a throne of rotting onions”. The actual recipe, though, remains a military secret.

None of these, however, comes close to the feral intensity of a chemical called thioacetone ((CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>CS). Chemist David Lowe says: “It reeks to a degree that makes people suspect evil supernatural forces.” He cites an occasion when thioacetone was accidentally synthesised in a lab in Freiburg, Germany, in 1889 and escaping fumes resulted in what a first-hand report described as “an offensive smell which spread rapidly over a great area of the town, causing fainting, vomiting and a panic evacuation.” As thioacetone is only stable as a liquid at -20 degrees, Lowe suspects the Freiburg horror was probably the result of thioacetone derivatives, but concedes that all these are likely to smell pretty evil.

With its reputation going before it, thioacetone chemistry was pretty much left alone until 1967, when British researchers Victor Burnop and Kenneth Latham, at an Esso research station in Abingdon near Oxford, decided it was worth looking into once more as a potential source of new polymers. This did not go well. After synthesising a tiny amount, they swiftly found themselves ostracised, as even with containment and protective clothing they still ended up carrying a hideous miasma with them: “Two of our chemists who had done no more than investigate the cracking of minute amounts of trithioacetone found themselves the object of hostile stares in a restaurant and suffered the humiliation of having a waitress spray the area around them with a deodorant.”

It got considerably worse when an accidental unstoppering of a thioacetone residue bottle created what the researchers described as “an odour problem beyond our worst expectations” and an immediate complaint of nausea and sickness from colleagues working in a building 200 yards away. The research went no further, but by now they had calculated that all it takes is a single drop to make an area of half a square kilometre intolerably smelly. It still remains unclear what exactly it is about the structure of thioacetone that makes it reek so intensely, but unsurprisingly no one seems particularly interested in investigating further.

### FURTHER READING

Derek Lowe, “Things I Won’t Work With: Thioacetone”, [https://blogs.sciencemag.org/pipeline/archives/2009/06/11/things\\_i\\_wont\\_work\\_with\\_thioacetone](https://blogs.sciencemag.org/pipeline/archives/2009/06/11/things_i_wont_work_with_thioacetone)

Randall Munroe, “What’s the World’s Worst Smell?”, [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/science/worst-odor-smell-thioacetone.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/science/worst-odor-smell-thioacetone.html)

♦ IAN SIMMONS is Fortean Times News Editor. He lives in Essex



## Geosynchronicity

**ROB BRAY** joins the dots from his past and finds some surprising alignments.

For many years I've enjoyed strolling around the environments of my past – most notably my childhood neighbourhood, the woods and open spaces I roamed and explored as a teenager, and my old university campus. I'd say that I've been practising a personalised form of psychogeography without naming it.

Psychogeography's origins lie in the urban explorations of the 1950s Letterists,<sup>1</sup> the aim of whose free-flowing rambles was to map the energetic forces at play within the built environment, exploring their effects on the emotional lives of the human inhabitants of towns and cities. Nowadays, the term is used with rather more freedom, and covers a range of approaches to pedestrian urban wandering. Nick Papadimitriou names his practice of conscious walking "deep topography". His approach is a synthesis of factual observation of mundane topographical details and the subjective, experiential relationship between himself and the changing urban environment.<sup>2</sup>

Without being aware of my psychogeographic forerunners, I've always seen my own nostalgic perambulations as a means of connecting with my former self via topographic features and built structures that unite my present with my past. By standing where I stood 25 years ago, leaning against the same wall, gazing at the same building, resting my foot on the same little ledge, I can reliably achieve a strongly felt inner sense of reunion with the me of that earlier time. There's no particular purpose to this; it just excites and pleases me, and it feels like the right thing to do when I visit a place from my past. Sometimes the sense of reconnection is mild and



lingers for long enough for me to savour and inspect it; at other times it's almost shockingly powerful but can't be held on to, disappearing if I attempt to examine it.

This practice extends to the contemplation of key characters in my personal history and how our courses through life have intersected, aligned, and diverged. I've always had a fondness for maps too, and a few years ago I decided to pull these various strands of thought and exploration together by looking into the possibility that there might be synchronistic alignments between locations of personal significance in my life.

I bought a large map of Britain and stuck it to my office wall. I quickly noticed that a line drawn from the first town I lived in to the town I live in now passes through Keele – known to many as the location of a service station on the M6, but significant to me as the university whose beautiful campus was my stomping ground

from 1992 to 1995. There are extensive woodlands on the campus, and I spent a lot of time in them during my three years as an undergraduate student. One tree in particular was a favourite spot of mine. I'd often climb a short way up it to where a thick branch leant out at just the right angle for me to recline on it and enjoy a quiet think.

Spotting this alignment, and craving greater detail than my 1:550,000 map could hope to afford, I turned to Google Maps, where I made the happy discovery that it's possible to drop pins into a map and plot straight lines between them.<sup>3</sup> By zooming in to a scale at which I could drop a pin right into the roof of each house, I found that a straight line from my first house (near Liverpool) to my current house (near Milton Keynes) not only passes through the campus of my old university, but actually runs through the woods and close to the tree in which I used to sit. (Furthermore, this same line passes precisely through another significant rooftop: that of my sister-in-law's flat in Milton Keynes.)

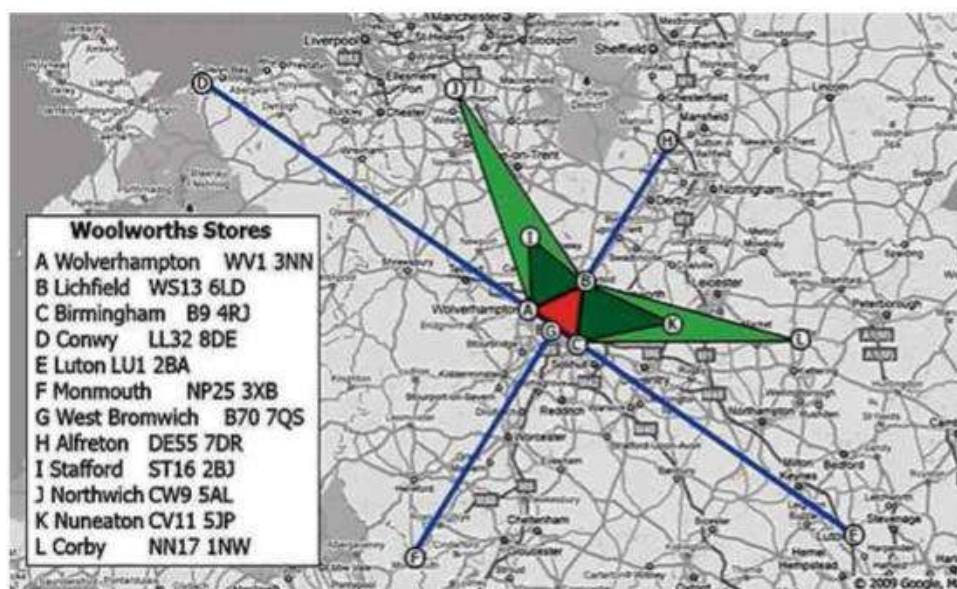
Excited by this surprising coincidence, which I had by now termed "Geosynchronicity", I contacted my former girlfriend from those Keele days (who I'll call Sophie) and we agreed I should plot points for her addresses too.

*"We know there is a lot of debris that others claim to have retrieved"*



**TOP:** A map showing alignments running between the author's and Sophie's old and new homes, Keele University and Glastonbury. **ABOVE:** Glastonbury Tor was a significant location for both and lies on a line between their current homes.





ABOVE LEFT: Keele University lies on a line between the author's first and current homes. ABOVE RIGHT: Matt Parker's Woolworths shape.

We were quite astonished to find that a line matching the same criteria as mine, namely joining her first home (near Manchester) to her current home (in Devon) with rooftop accuracy, passes right through those same woods where we used to spend so much time at Keele.

As you can imagine, I was keen to look at other significant locations to see if there were more alignments to be found. A favourite haunt of mine and Sophie's was the town of Glastonbury. We'd often go together to a campsite (closed since the late 1990s, sadly) at the foot of Glastonbury Tor, and would always consider an ascent of the Tor to be a vital part of each trip. It turns out that a line from my current home to Sophie's current home passes through Glastonbury and runs right between the campsite and the Tor. But not only are our respective homes (some 270km/186 miles apart) joined by a straight line through Glastonbury, they both also have solstitial alignments with the town. From my house, the Winter Solstice Sun sets over Glastonbury, while from Sophie's house, the Summer Solstice Sun rises over Glastonbury (both within one degree of the Tor).<sup>4</sup> For me, the fact that we've unknowingly located ourselves on opposite sides of that special place at such an angle that our homes are also aligned with the Solstices is amazing enough, even without the crossing of our other lines at the university where we met.

I have many other alignments on file, and I continue to be surprised by the coincidences I discover.

After university, I moved to a house chosen with minimal consideration in another town. It turns out that house is within 100m (328ft) of a 240km- (150 mile) long line between Sophie's house at that time and the address where my wife (whom I hadn't yet met) was then living. Given the personal circumstances surrounding that move, and the changes to my life that followed it, I cannot help but be impressed by the magnitude of that coincidence. Looking at my wife's other former addresses, we've also found a line that connects her first house with two of her other homes. That's a line from Milton Keynes via London to Switzerland, covering over 800km (500 miles), and aligning three of her dwellings with rooftop precision.

But should any of this really be surprising? Readers with an interest in leys may have seen the impressive geometric shape that comedian and mathematician Matt Parker produced by plotting the locations of 12 former branches of Woolworths as a counter to the supposed significance of apparent alignments between ancient religious and spiritual sites.<sup>5</sup> But Parker's shape, while visually striking, does not boast any great precision or symmetry. For example, the three locations in the Midlands that appear to be on the line between Conwy and Luton are actually all 2-3km (1.2-1.9 miles) from it. While these distances may be close to the tolerances permitted for some celebrated leys, such as the St Michael Line, there's not a single three-point

alignment in the Woolworths shape that comes close to the precision I've found, and that's in spite of there being over 800 Woolworths stores to choose from. Perhaps some more precise alignments might be revealed if all those locations were plotted and studied, but to do so would be a task far more onerous than was necessary for Parker to make his point; a full list of addresses is available online if anyone wishes to give it a go.<sup>6</sup> I accept the Woolworths shape as a compelling example of how convincing patterns can be found within any sufficiently large set of data if you've the desire to see them, but it's not powerful enough to diminish my wonder at the far more accurate alignments I've so far found from around a dozen significant addresses of a handful of people close to me.

And that's all I'm claiming here: my own wonder. I'm not asserting that my alignments *mean* anything – at least, not in any objective sense. This investigation enriches my reflections, it stimulates contemplation of the reciprocal relationship between places and people, it suggests the influence of the unconscious on our movements and choices, and it hints at a 'vertical' interpretation of time, where past and future are facets of a single, unified event extruding into time-bound awareness. More simply, I like maps, I enjoy reflecting on past places and experiences, and coincidences give me a buzz. That makes this pursuit rewarding enough. But I do think that what I've found so far is rather unlikely. I encourage you to give

it a try with your own addresses and places of significance. Maybe scores of FT readers will find alignments as personally resonant and geographically accurate as mine, and that will surely be interesting. Or maybe only very few will find anything noteworthy, which would make my results all the more surprising.

#### NOTES

- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychogeography>
  - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick\\_Papadimitriou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick_Papadimitriou). John Rogers's 2009 film *The London Perambulator* is an excellent introduction to Nick Papadimitriou's practice of deep topography.
  - You need to expand the menu at the top of a Google maps page, select 'Your places', go to the 'MAPS' tab, and hit 'CREATE MAP'. Thereafter, when viewing your maps, always click 'Open in My Maps' to get access to the line drawing and measurement tools. I recommend you use a mouse with a scroll wheel.
  - [www.movable-type.co.uk/scripts/latlong.html](http://www.movable-type.co.uk/scripts/latlong.html) is useful for converting map coordinates to angles. I also use the mobile app *Sun Surveyor* for quickly identifying Sun and Moon positions for any location and date.
  - <https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/527-the-st-michael-line-a-straight-story>
  - [www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/WoolworthStores-FullList.html](http://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/WoolworthStores-FullList.html)
- ♦ **ROB BRAY** is a musician based in Northamptonshire, where he blends folk and jazz influences into the mythical, mystical, nature-themed songs of *The Straw Horses*. You can read more about Geosynchronicity and Astrosynchronicity on Rob's blog at: <https://everydayanomalist.wordpress.com/>



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## A secret never to be told

Religions and other organisations have long used both the promise and the threat of secrecy as a powerful means of controlling their members, says **Ted Harrison**

### Secrecy

**Silence, Power, and Religion**

Hugh B Urban

University of Chicago 2021

Pb, 264pp, £24, ISBN 9780226746647

“Top Secret” – possibly the most intriguing and, at the same time, most disconcerting two-word phrase in the English language.

Whether applied to secret rites of Freemasons or appearing on a sign at the entrance to the infamous Area 51, the words are forbidding and fascinating in equal parts.

Secrecy is used as a weapon of state control. The more authoritarian a regime, the more brutal and shadowy are the secret police. Secrecy is the hold abusers have over their victims. It is a protective cloak worn by tight-knit communities. It can also be a bond of intimacy.

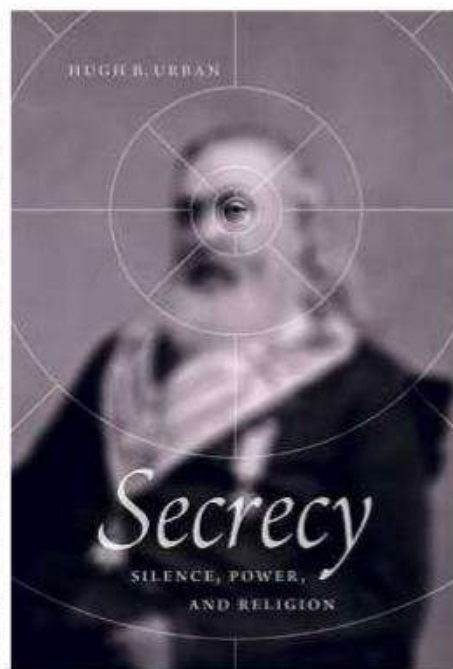
*Secrecy* is the title of Hugh Urban’s book in which he takes examples of secrecy in religious movements and examines how this secrecy is manipulated by the powerful to give them control over others. Very much as in the political sphere, power through secrecy and fear is a well practised art in religious organisations. The recently revealed cover-ups by mainstream churches of priests who were sexual abusers illustrates this.

In his introduction Urban borrows the vocabulary of religion. Secrecy, he says, is the vestment of power. Secrecy is not about possessing fabulous esoteric knowledge, but is a strategy for “acquiring, enhancing, preserving and/or protecting power”.

Some latter-day religious movements claim to have had divine, extraterrestrial or supernatural revelations, Mormonism, for instance, is based on the sacred writings vouchsafed to their

founder Joseph Smith which he translated, in secret, into English.

In other instances founders of movements claim to have rediscovered ancient wisdom from long-forgotten sources. Theosophy developed from the journeys of the mysterious and charismatic Madame Blavatsky. She travelled across the Himalayas in the mid-19th century, where she says she encountered enlightened beings. As a writer, her prodigious output drew on a far wider palette, one which she shares with several other comparable religious and philosophical movements who consulted, repeated or misquoted from a mishmash of alluring esoteric texts covering such subjects as Gnosticism, the Templars, Alchemy, Tarot, Tantra and Shamanism.



One of the paradoxes of secrecy in the religious context, however, is that, without giving any secrets away, secrecy is used as a marketing tool, a hook to lure new adherents into a movement. The reputation of the secret is promoted while the secret itself is kept inaccessible.

Madame Blavatsky offered her esoteric secrets to a wider public

*Ultimate knowledge does not in fact ever have to be revealed for secrecy to be a potent tool of control*

with a promise that there were ancient and deep mysteries to be learned. She became a highly influential figure and members of the Theosophical Society, which she founded, included many significant figures in the arts and high society in the late Victorian period.

A more recent example of this paradox is the case of Scientology. The Church of Scientology was founded by an enigmatic science fiction writer, L Ron Hubbard, and teaches that by acquiring deep and ancient knowledge a person can escape the limitations of the material universe and, as an Operating Thetan, acquire such skills as clairvoyance and bilocation. However, reaching that degree of enlightenment costs money. Each stage of initiation requires large payments to be made to the Church and a presumption of ever greater obedience to the organisation.

A second paradox of secrecy is that ultimate knowledge does not in fact ever have to be revealed for secrecy to be a potent tool of control by the powerful over their followers. The final answer to the ultimate mystery may not perhaps even exist. It is always kept tantalisingly out of reach.

Even Freemasons reaching the highest level (32nd) of the Sublime Secret, are not actually told the innermost secret of masonic symbols. Rather, they are in-

formed that many symbols have still deeper meanings rooted in ancient mysteries. Urban quotes the French occultist Éliphas Lévi: “Freemasonry is so powerful in the world because of its dread secret, so wonderfully kept that the initiates, even those who are in the highest degrees, do not know it.”

Although Urban is scholastic and analytical in style, the book cannot help but be enlivened by the characters behind the religious movements he highlights. The colourful Madame Blavatsky competes with the 19th-century guru of American Freemasonry, Albert Pike, once a sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite. He was a former brigadier general in the Confederate Army who suffered a humiliating scandal and exiled himself to the wilderness before emerging to write a massive tome on masonic practices.

Then there is Maria de Naglowska who taught that women held in themselves the deepest theological secret and that the power of their sexuality in ritual practice reconciles God and Satan.

The cast also includes Clarence 13X, leader of the Five Percenters, a breakaway movement from the Nation of Islam, as well as influential figures on the far right-wing of American politics who have been active in shadowy White Supremacy groups.

Secrecy is itself an enigma, lying at the “critical intersection of knowledge and power”, as Urban suggests.

It appears to be flourishing today in many spheres of activity alongside, perhaps in reaction to, the decline in personal privacy that has come about thanks to new technology.

★★★★★



# Funerary facts

**James Holloway** suggests that a wide overview could have done with more depth

## Burying the Dead

**An Archaeological History of Burial Grounds, Graveyards and Cemeteries**

Lorraine Evans

Pen & Sword 2020

Hb, 216pp, £19.99. ISBN 9781526706676

Human funerary practice is as varied as every other aspect of culture, and the rites practised by one culture can seem inexplicable or even grotesque to another. In *Burying the Dead*, Lorraine Evans surveys burial practices throughout history and around the world, picking out particularly interesting examples to showcase the diversity and changeability of custom and belief.

Evans has cast her nets wide: in her first two chapters, which begin with the transition from paganism to Christianity in England, she incorporates examples from Mexico, Hawaii, Borneo, Tibet, Malawi, Bhutan, Lithuania, Ghana, Alaska and more.

She then divides up her material thematically: the next chapter focuses on “deviant” burials, which include not only people who existed on the fringes of society, such as unbaptised children or executed criminals, but also those thought of as dangerous after death. These include “vampire” burials, where steps seem to have been taken to prevent the dead body from rising. After deviant burials, Evans investigates conflict graves, burials at sea or underwater, war memorials, the history of the modern cemetery, and even cemeteries for non-humans, such as pet cemeteries or aeroplane “graveyards.”

There’s so much variety in *Burying the Dead* that any

reader can learn something new – even if you know everything there is to know about early mediæval execution cemeteries, you may be unaware that a 19th-century architect proposed building a 94-storey pyramid to hold the bodies of up to five million Londoners.

The first problem with *Burying the Dead* is that it never really goes beyond this kind of overview. Evans amasses an impressive number of examples to show off the diversity of human funeral practice, but the chapters lack real conclusions and indeed don’t really have arguments.

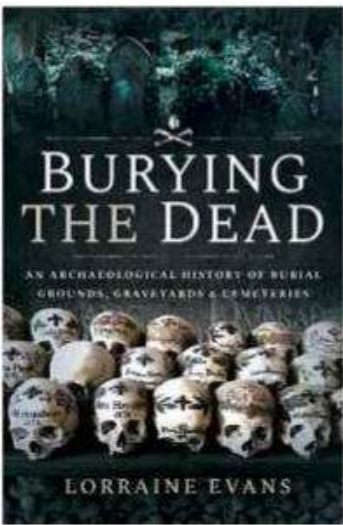
The second issue is production. An overview of worldwide burial practice could be enjoyable for a curious reader or someone just getting into burial studies, but the execution needs some work to make it more accessible. The text lacks maps, and its only illustrations are a set of photographs of different

cemeteries and burial rites. The discussion of vampire burials would have been greatly improved with some illustrated examples, for instance, as would many of the other themes. The problems also extend to the text, which needs some

further editing.

*Burying the Dead* takes a refreshingly inclusive approach to writing about burial, creating an enjoyable tour of the varied funerary customs of human history. It’s packed with fascinating examples of burial practices, but lacks detailed context or sustained argument. If it advanced a more substantive point or added some more excitement to its collection of funerary facts, it would be a more satisfying work.

★★★



## Those They Called Idiots

**The Idea of the Disabled Mind from 1700 to the Present Day**

Simon Jarrett

Reaktion Books 2020

Hb, 352pp, £25, ISBN 9781789143010

During the last chapter of his excellent new history, Simon Jarrett writes that in mid-20th-century Britain, those we would now call intellectually disabled “could truly lay claim to the title of out-group of all out-groups, the most surveilled, controlled and incarcerated population in the land”.

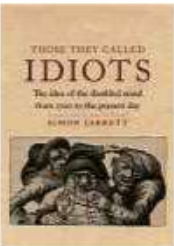
What Jarrett explains in this book is how this came to be and what lessons that past may offer us for the future.

Such a history certainly fits with a forteen interest in the strange and the untypical. What challenges our modern sensibilities is that it’s not historical events that are being described here as anomalous – but people.

The search for the “patient voice” is often undertaken by medical historians – but what to do when their voice is absent from the historical record? Beginning his study in the early 1700s, legal records provide Jarrett’s first source, often describing wrangles over the person and the property of those judged *non compos mentis*. But these disputes are key to Jarrett’s argument: responsibilities of care were matters for family and community at the time, not incarceration in medicalised institutions.

In a deft use of available resources, Jarrett draws upon joke books and slang dictionaries to further his argument: yes, jokes were made about “idiots” but for Jarrett the fact that they were suggests they had a recognisable, visible presence in society to be the butt of jokes.

For Jarrett, their change into a more problematic social type came about in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as travel diaries and later more “scientific” accounts of “natives” started to feed back into British society. As a sliding scale of intelligence came to be constructed (with the white man at the top and the dark-skinned “savage” at the bottom), the intellectually disabled



found themselves inserted into this schema as well. By the 1860s, hierarchical racial comparisons were at the root of notions that “abnormal” (white) adults were atavistic “throwbacks”.

Social changes in the early 1800s as to what made a “useful” member of British society (whether from radicals or conservatives) would also impact upon notions of their rightful place in the world.

By the end of the 19th century, with “idiots” falling under the purview of new medical professionals, that place in the world became increasingly seen as outside “normal” society and in specialist asylums.

Jarrett traces his story to the present day, steering a course through the rise (and fall) of eugenic thinking and developments in psychology, through the closure of the asylums and the introduction of “care in the community” treatment.

The history he tells is a complex one, drawing as it does on changing social, cultural, medical and religious contexts; but Jarrett’s superbly clear, jargon-free prose makes the difficult and emotive topics he covers understandable and relatable. This is a book very much alive to the sensitivity of its topic but one careful not to damn the past by the standards of the present.

At a time when troubling aspects of our past are being reassessed, this is a work that certainly feels part of those conversations. It also suggests that the past, despite its many traumas, may even be able to offer hopeful and positive suggestions on how societies can adapt to all their members.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★

## The Lost Species

**Great Expeditions in the Collections of Natural History Museums**

Christopher Kemp

University of Chicago Press 2020

Pb, 271pp, £17, ISBN 9780226513706

You don’t have to clamber up the Himalayan foothills, hack your way through the Congo or trek across north-east India to find unknown species. Instead, root around the collections of natural history museums, where millions of species await discovery. Or just





open your back door.

Christopher Kemp recounts how a researcher found an “unusually large” rove beetle in a box of bugs from London’s Natural History Museum. Darwin collected the beetle (*Darwinilus sedarisi*) when he visited Argentina in 1832. Some 180 years later, this attractive beetle was finally named and described scientifically.

Finding a previously undescribed beetle may not have the cachet of discovering the Yeti, Mokele-mbembe or Buru. But take the time to learn about them (Richard Jones’s *Beetles* in the New Naturalist series is a superlative introduction) and they’re fascinating.

*The Lost Species* is essential for anyone with even a passing interest in biology (crypto- or otherwise). Kemp describes, for example, how unrecognised species hide in plain sight. In 2014, researchers published the first description of the Atlantic Coast leopard frog (*Rana kaufeldi*) based on a specimen collected on New York’s Staten Island. In 2015, entomologists reported that they had discovered 30 new species of fly trapped in backyards across Los Angeles.

As Kemp comments: “Unknown biodiversity is everywhere... Go stand in your backyard and it’s there.”

Sometimes biologists rely on remarkably scant evidence, which could offer solace to cryptozoologists struggling with the same problem. Herpetologists know a species of African squeaker frog (*Arthroleptis kutoguanda*) from just two specimens collected in 1899 and 1930. Entomologists described a longhorn beetle (*Pseudicator kingsleyae*) from a single specimen collected in 1896 in Ghana by explorer Mary Kingsley, whose life would make a great movie or documentary.

Indeed, Kemp eloquently conveys the passion that scientists have about their field, even if it’s as seemingly esoteric as sexing flies, which depends on closely examining genitalia. A bean weevil’s (*Callosobruchus maculatus*) impressive penis is topped “with a bristling cluster of spikes like a mediæval mace”. (Google it!)

A thread running through the book eloquently emphasises why

we must maintain and adequately fund natural history collections. After all, we live in the midst of the sixth extinction (the last one wiped out the dinosaurs). As Kemp notes: “How can we protect an animal we haven’t named?”

*The Lost Species* is a compelling, fascinating, accessible yet scientifically robust book that I can’t recommend too highly.

Mark Greener

★★★★★

## The Nature of Conspiracy Theories

Michael Butter, tr Sharon Howe

Polity Press 2020

Pb, 210pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781509540822

In this well-researched book, Michael Butter argues that far from being a modern phenomenon, conspiracy theories were not just present but part of mainstream politics for centuries. He quotes Churchill’s writings on “International Jews”, which suggest that global communism is part of an elaborate plot dating back to before the French Revolution, and Lincoln’s endorsement of the Slave Power conspiracy movement which believed shadowy powers were planning to extend slavery from the South across the entire US.

The situation has now shifted, with conspiracy theory now relegated to the role of “illegitimate” rather than “legitimate” discourse. Butter deftly charts this progress, in the process explaining the function of three features of conspiracy theory – “Everything is planned”, “Nothing is as it seems” and “Everything is connected” – and how these distinguish it from other approaches. He treads carefully through the minefield of real conspiracies and the modern use of the label of “conspiracy theory” to dismiss opposing narratives.

He homes in on the development of particular theories, such as those surrounding the 9/11 attacks, and the rise of particular individuals including Alex Jones, David Icke and Donald Trump on the back of such theories.

He also shows the technique of “just asking questions” can support a vast range of different

and often contradictory theories, attacking the official version without committing to a coherent alternative.

One chapter is devoted to the Internet and how it shapes conspiracy theory, and in particular the business model it provides. It is not just a matter of communication; people make good money out of fanning the flames and looking for fuel to pour on them.

In his conclusion, Butter looks at potential dangers posed by conspiracy theory, and how education can “inoculate” against its harmful effects (ironic, since anti-vaxxers are among the more dangerous groups). He identifies the fragmentation of society as the real issue, and sees conspiracy theory as an effect, not a cause of the current situation.

*The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* is translated from the German, but it certainly doesn’t show. The book is more lucid and fluent than many works originally in English, the only clue to its origin being the deep knowledge of German-language conspiracists. It is a short and accessible read, a counter-argument to anyone who thinks German academics are verbose and impenetrable.

This book is certainly not the last word on the topic, but it is a strong contribution, and an excellent starting point for anyone interested in understanding conspiracy theories.

David Hambling

★★★★★

## It’s the End of the World

But What Are We Really Afraid Of?

Adam Roberts

Elliott & Thompson 2020

Hb, 288pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781783964741

The literal “end of the world”, in the sense of the ultimate demise of planet Earth, lies billions of years in the future – but that’s not what this book is about. Instead, Adam Roberts focuses on humanity’s perennial obsession with its own end. From the Norse legend of Ragnarök to the climate emergency of today, this always seems to be alarmingly imminent.

From an analytical point of view, there are three aspects to any particular end-of-world

scenario: its scientific plausibility, its place in the popular imagination and its relation to the broader culture of its time. Roberts, a professor of English Literature with a sideline in science fiction, is strong on the second and third of these, but can sound glib and superficial when he’s talking about science.

In fact he’s at his best when dealing with products of pure imagination, such as the zombie apocalypse or the biblical book of Revelation. Both of these, when he picks them apart, say more about the political conflicts and societal insecurities of their day than anything that might happen in the future.

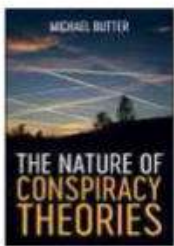
The book’s blurb describes it as “thought-provoking” – which I agree with, but not in an entirely complimentary way. I kept thinking of fascinating topics I wanted the author to delve into far more deeply than he does. For example, he barely mentions the looming threat of nuclear annihilation that dominated world affairs for the first 30-odd years of my life, or (going from the sublime to the ridiculous) the elaborate nuttiness of the 2012 phenomenon, which engrossed and entertained so many of us just a few years ago.

I was also disappointed by the lack of a clear distinction between fictional themes that are outright impossible (like zombies) and those that are merely improbable, such as an AI takeover or alien invasion. Stephen Hawking, for one, was genuinely concerned about both these eventualities in his later years, and I would have liked to see them discussed from a scientific as well as a pop-culture perspective.

These are missed opportunities – but it’s not a bad book, and when Roberts takes the time to explore a topic in depth the result can be very insightful. The chapter on pandemics, for example, was written during the Covid-19 crisis. He makes the excellent point that, while any real-world plague may only kill a fraction of the population, the various political, social and economic stresses that come with it could still spell the end of civilisation as we know it.

Andrew May

★★★





# The science behind Poe

**Roger Luckhurst** finds a new study of Edgar Allan Poe at times strains the art and science argument, but still brings some new insights

## The Reason for the Darkness of the Night

**Edgar Allan Poe and the Forging of American Science**

John Tresch

Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2021

Hb, 448pp, £21.20, ISBN 9780374247850

This study, with its slightly cumbersome title, is structured as a biography of the writer Edgar Allan Poe, but with a strong emphasis on Poe's interactions with the scientific revolutions that took place in America during his short life (1809-49).

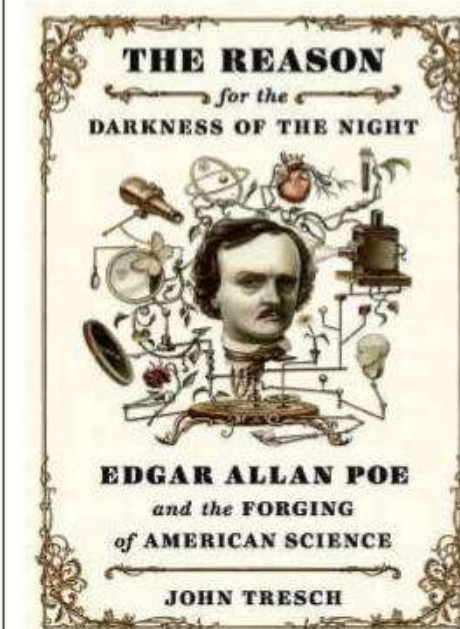
John Tresch is an historian of science at the Warburg Institute in London, so brings a detailed knowledge of the scientific and technical advances of the era into conjunction with the grotesqueries of Poe's Gothic imagination. This promises many fertile fortaean possibilities.

The book begins with a powerful evocation of the personal and scientific contexts that were swirling around Poe when he gave his comeback lecture in 1848, eventually published as "Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe". (Poe was born under an unlucky star, so a violent storm prevented most of his audience from turning up for the talk on the night.) Steering between the latest scientific thought and the powers of the imagination, Tresch suggests the lecture shows how Poe needs to be understood not as a late Romantic *poète maudit* railing against material or mechanistic explanations of the world, but rather as someone who was in a unique position to offer a fusion of poetry and science.

Thus, as the book takes us through Poe's fitful, self-sabotaging career, there is an emphasis on his early fascination with astronomy, his reading around the revolutionary new "nebular hypothesis", which caused many ructions to conventional Christian beliefs about Creation,

or his training in mathematics and engineering during his stints in the Army and at the West Point military academy. When the itinerant writer moved from Richmond to Baltimore, to New York or to Philadelphia, Tresch is on hand to sketch out skilfully the burgeoning scientific worlds of these cities, and some of their leading personalities.

As in England, the 1830s were a crucial time in America for the rise of organised and institutional science. Many of Poe's nasty horrors – such as the hauntingly open-ended Antarctic exploration in *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* – rely on a close attention to scientific developments. *Pym*, presented as a seafaring testimony of extraordinary events as told to the writer, did fool some readers into believing it was an eyewitness account (others berated him for the feeble deception). It is fascinating to read Poe's



agitated annotations to one of the Bridgewater Treatises, books written by divines trying to square new geological, biological and astronomical timescales with biblical truths. In these margins was exactly where he forged his alchemical Gothic tales.

Tresch also doesn't shy away from examining Poe's interactions with the emergence of racial science in the South in the decades before the Civil War. Scientific racism was pivotal for

defences of the institution of slavery.

We probably don't need another biography of Poe, whose catastrophic life and miserable death has been covered many times, including by some of the acknowledged greats of the genre. Tresch brings a wider understanding of science at the time, though, and this allows for new insights.

At times, I thought the book strained within the biographical structure, which sometimes feels imposed on what might have been a more traditional academic study of an author in the scientific context of America's Jacksonian Era. When Tresch sidesteps into the career of scientific figures such as Joseph Henry or Alexander Dallas Brache (both key to forging federal investment in scientific institutions in the 1830s and 1840s), it takes a while to get back to a life of Poe. Sections of Poe's primrose path to an early death sometimes feel they are dealt with gesturally because Tresch is less interested in the author's familial psychodramas or addictions.

Sometimes, too, *The Reason for the Darkness of the Night* strains to pull together the art and science argument. Tresch suggests Poe analysed the popular magazine market and its genres with the eye of an engineer, carefully constructing his *Blackwood's Magazine* knock-offs as if with precision tools and cold, mathematical calculation. This feels a little contrived to me, and the author's rich scientific understanding of the era is not always matched with a knowledge of the developments in the Gothic romance in the 1820s, which makes some of the analysis of the poetry and prose feel underpowered.

There remains enough novelty of approach to Poe as a writer undoubtedly steeped in the scientific revolutions of his time to tarry with this authoritative contribution to the field.

★ ★ ★

## A Demon-Haunted Land

**Witches, Wonder Doctors and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany**

Monica Black

Metropolitan Books 2020

Hb, 352pp, £21.60, ISBN 9781250225672

It is hardly surprising that in the aftermath of World War II, forced to face and account for the horrors of the Third Reich, Germany was haunted by ghosts of its recent past, but historian Monica Black poses an interesting question: what if the haunting wasn't merely metaphorical? What if those ghosts took other forms? She doesn't suggest that literal spirits or demons flooded Germany in the late 1940s and 1950s, of course, but belief in the supernatural seemed to skyrocket – a symptom, she argues, of the tempestuous anxiety roiling beneath the cracked surface of

a traumatised society, escaping and taking new forms.

Her central character is controversial *Wunderdoktor* Bruno Gröning, who

practised "miraculous" healing through simple talk of faith, the manipulation of a mysterious healing wave and balls of tinfoil, gaining fame and a following. His brand of naïve, intuitive talk therapy apparently worked to heal people suffering from psychosomatic maladies they didn't understand or couldn't articulate, but it also led to what looks like classic cases of mass hysteria.

Black calls this a "vertical" haunting, as people sought a saviour figure immediately after the war. There was also "horizontal" haunting, in the form of neighbours accusing one another of witchcraft, resulting in scores of witchcraft trials between 1947 and 1965. Many Germans still believed in witches in the mid-20th century, and the media were attracted to the novelty of the superstition's survival. No doubt it helped drive coverage that witches and *Wunderdoktors* were much easier to discuss than what really haunted the country.

Black identifies, names and captures these haunting spirits, translating them back to their original forms, as part of her engaging effort to find the messages they carried.

J Caleb Mozzocco

★ ★ ★ ★



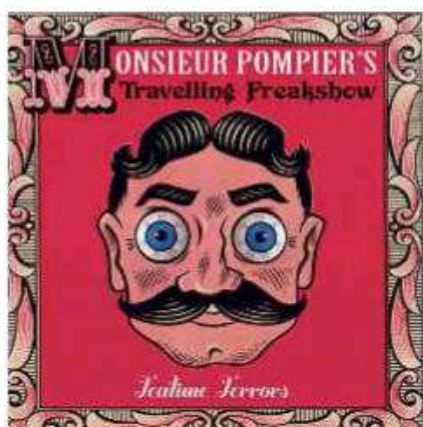


# THE HAUNTED GENERATION

BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE  
PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY...

“Were it not for the physical evidence left behind, the Twiggywitch would belong very firmly in the supernatural realm of fairies, elves and goblins...” Trigger warning: there’s also a chilling glimpse of Rupert Bear’s appalling woodland acquaintance, Raggety. This is all part of ‘The Hereford Twiggywitch’, the third episode of a beautifully made Youtube series, *British Cryptids*. Quietly gaining traction since April this year, it purports to be the remnants of an un-broadcast 1974 TV series, seen only by numb-buttocked children sitting cross-legged on freezing school floors. Accompanied by crackly stock footage and laugh-out-loud animations, its plummy-voiced narration warns of this gnome-like woodland beastie. “Witnesses describe a small, bi-pedal animal, made of what looked like grey, fragile twigs...” An earlier episode detailing the sheep-troubling horrors of the ‘Yorkshire Yeti’ is also present, and – apparently – ‘The Cave Children of Coniston’ are on their way. It’s a glorious spoof, pitched midway between *BBC Programmes for Schools and Colleges* and *Arthur C Clarke’s Mysterious World* (see pp32-39), with an affecting electronic soundtrack by “Thorsten Schmidt”.

Also languishing in Arthur-friendly territory are Klaus Morlock and Matt Peach, making music as Dechmont Woods. Their adopted monicker is taken from the location of forestry worker Bob Taylor’s trouser-shredding close encounter in November 1979, which – incidentally – is also the title of the album: *November 1979*, that is... nothing to do with trousers. Poor Bob reportedly had his strides torn by a UFO parked in a Scottish woodland clearing, and the album takes an almost Jeff Wayne approach to this peculiar tale: with Richard Burton-style narration (“Bob had his breakfast – as normal”) giving way to Radiophonic Workshop swirls and funky basslines.



Grab it from woodfordhalse.bandcamp.com.

Occupying similarly cosmic ground – just a little closer to Ipswich – is A Farewell To Hexes. This is the electronic side project of Adam Leonard, also of BBC 6 Music-approved rockers Invaderland. No prizes for guessing the inspiration behind his new album *Rendlesham*, a splendidly sinister synth-fuelled account of the rum business that enveloped this picturesque Suffolk forest in December 1980. Epic 18-minute track ‘The Halt Tape in Colour’ even incorporates snippets of the infamous tape recordings made by RAF Woodbridge’s deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Halt. A limited-edition cassette sold out in nanoseconds, but it’s available to download from adamleonard.bandcamp.com/music.

Stephen Prince has been a busy chap, too. Stephen is – appropriately – the force of nature behind *A Year in the Country*, a multi-media



exploration of rustic oddness that has borne wonderful fruit in recent years. Probably literally. Woven throughout his work is the story of *The Shildam Hall Tapes*, the fragmented echoes of an abandoned 1960s film shot in a remote rural mansion. A new novella of the same title tantalisingly fleshes out the story, with a lover’s lament – composed in the house in 1799 – lingering to haunt subsequent generations. The book comes with an accompanying album, *The Falling Reverse*, a gorgeous and disquieting collection of electronic chamber music. Visit [ayearinthecountry.co.uk](http://ayearinthecountry.co.uk).

Also mired in pastoral strangeness is Nottingham-based Rebecca Lee, making music as Bredbeddle – the given name of the infamous mediæval Greene Knight. Her new album *Steps on the Turning Year* is an epic two-hour sound collage creating an utterly immersive world. Fragments of school assembly hymns, Children’s Film Foundation

flutes, traditional folk rounds and disembodied radio voices drift through the ether as gently as the passing seasons, evoking – as the title suggests – both hallucinatory summer torpor and ice-cold wintry keenness. Get it at [bezirk.bandcamp.com](http://bezirk.bandcamp.com).

Back indoors, Chris “Concretism” Sharp is watching the box. New album *Teliffusion* is a woozy homage to obsolete TV and video formats, the perfect synth-fuelled accompaniment to fastforwarding through old VHS tapes filled with late-night pages from CEEFAX. Head to [castlesinspace.bandcamp.com](http://castlesinspace.bandcamp.com). And for a more pop-fuelled explosion of vintage strangeness, try *Teatime Terrors*, the alarming new album by Monsieur Pompier’s Travelling Freakshow. Citing both Sparks and *Tales of the Unexpected* as influences, and dressed in outfits from some nightmarish episode of *Dramarama Spooky*, they spin gloriously tall tales of lying boys with bananas for fingers, and the lesser-spotted earwax fairy. Visit [monsieurpompier.bandcamp.com](http://monsieurpompier.bandcamp.com).

And to finish... cheeky half, anyone? A new release on Ghost Box Records is always cause for celebration, and ToiToiToi – aka Berlin-based artist Sebastian Counts – has unveiled *Vaganten*, a rollicking collection of electronic early music with a splendidly drunken lurch. “It’s funky mediævalism,” he claims, of an album inspired by the German “vagrant” tradition – a kind of bohemian, booze-fuelled wandering once beloved of particularly debauched monks. “You stroll around and land somewhere you didn’t expect to be... then everything turns out great!” All round to ghostbox.co.uk for last orders.

**Visit the Haunted Generation website at [www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk](http://www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk), send details of new releases, or memories of the original “haunted” era to [hauntedgeneration@gmail.com](mailto:hauntedgeneration@gmail.com).**



## Suspect: “Sasquatch”

In a new documentary, an undercover investigative journalist goes in search of the truth behind a decades-old homicide in California’s marijuana-farming community. Was Bigfoot really the killer?

### Sasquatch

Dir Joshua Rofé, US 2021  
Streaming on Hulu

Director Joshua Rofé’s *Sasquatch*, a three-part true crime documentary on the US streaming service Hulu, concerns embedded reporter David Holthouse’s recent investigation into an unsolved bloody triple murder in the early 1990s on a marijuana farm in the secretive communities of the Emerald Triangle of Northern California. The investigation hinges on Holthouse’s obsession with the exposure of real monsters; his career as an investigative journalist was inspired by his traumatic experience of childhood sexual abuse. He was briefly employed at the farm when the homicide occurred. On the night of the murder, he overheard a witness to the crime, one of the farm’s itinerant drug-addled workers, breathlessly whisper the perpetrator’s name: “Sasquatch”. Holthouse is understandably unable to shake this, and years later it leads him to investigate a now decades-old crime whose contours remain as dark and trackless as a Humboldt County logging road, and to interactions with several altogether human suspects who remain as hidden, and potentially threatening, as a Bigfoot in the forest underbrush.

Indeed, the first half of the documentary acts as a lively and informative refresher course on the Bigfoot phenomenon, and it has the benefit of true crime context – and a competent filmmaker at the helm – that sets it apart from a slate of recent Bigfoot-related cable programming. Interspersed are new interviews with such stalwart Bigfoot fixtures as Bob Gimlin, arguably the best-known living Bigfoot witness. It is about mid-point through its two-plus hour run time, however, that Bigfoot-as-suspect is abandoned



*The first half is a lively refresher on the Bigfoot phenomenon*

in favour of less mysterious (read: more likely) suspects, namely local criminal elements involved in the massively profitable and now primarily gang-related pot-growing scene, individuals whose only commonality with Bigfoot is their general unwillingness to be seen or filmed. Holthouse knows how to ingratiate himself with such unaccommodating characters, yet his pursuit quickly hits a series of brick walls, so insular and unfriendly are those he suspects are guilty. In place of further investigation into the crime, the last half of the documentary instead consists of a deep dive into a 50-year history on the economics, policing, and politics of marijuana farming, from the innocent 1960s hippie communities to the 1980s Drug War crackdowns, to the more recent infiltration of Mexican drug cartels. To his credit, filmmaker Rofé – whose previous project is the Amazon Prime Video series *Lorena*, about the infamous spousal abuse victim

Lorena Bobbit – is seamlessly able to weave the supernatural with issues of governmental overreach and the intricacies of a secretive community, the common thread being the difficulty of separating fact from fiction.

*Sasquatch* unfolds at a compulsively absorbing, breakneck pace, is accompanied by a pulsing, foreboding soundtrack, and possesses an undeniable air of menace throughout. As Holthouse’s memories form a large part of the evidence, frequent animated recreation sequences assist with their depiction. Where the documentary falls flat is in its final act, which consists mostly of one-sided phone calls with unhelpful suspects – their faces pixelated and their voices technologically doctored – that largely go nowhere, and effectively derail the drama. Nevertheless, *Sasquatch* remains a worthwhile study of human greed intersecting with our propensity for mythmaking and our love of a good mystery.

Eric Hoffman



### A Quiet Place Part II

Dir John Krasinski, US 2021  
Available on digital platforms

In 2018, actor, director and writer John Krasinski wowed audiences and critics alike with his tense and well-crafted high concept horror film *A Quiet Place*. Krasinski and real-life partner Emily Blunt portrayed a married couple with children who must survive in a world where the slightest sound can quickly become a matter of life or death. As audiences held their breath along with the protagonists, Krasinski’s excursion into horror boasted incredibly well-crafted sound design, a genuine sense of dread and grounded performances that made the

characters utterly compelling.

The sequel starts out strong with an intense flashback sequence that answers questions about how the terror began without demystifying its antagonists. Seeing the family’s interactions before circumstances forced them to go silent also gives the viewer a renewed appreciation for the familial dynamic that was integral to making the first film work so well. Some new characters are also introduced, some of whom reappear later on, albeit most are not afforded that luxury.

Once again, the sound design is outstanding. However, due to the character dynamic having changed since the last film, this second part has more dialogue; but this different balance between sound and silence adds welcome new layers to the viewing experience. Just as the sound design is carefully thought out, the characters also continue to make smart choices for the most part, which adds to their relatability and ensures that we remain invested in their struggles. As all of this character and narrative progression unfolds, Cillian Murphy enters the mix, proving to be a great addition to the cast, keeping the audience guessing about his moral fibre for some time.

If there is anything to criticise about this sequel, it’s that the pacing does feel somewhat uneven in places. While the juxtaposition of intensity versus character moments is a necessity when wanting to create a compelling film, the dynamic between the characters and the terrifying reality in which they find themselves does take a little while to reach the levels of its predecessor; but once it gets there, the tension is yet again relentless.

Leyla Mikkelsen





## TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings



### Ancient Aliens

History Channel

*Ancient Aliens* has become a ubiquitous presence on fortean TV, its influence spreading like the extraordinary hair of host Giorgio Tsoukalos. It's currently in its 16th season and counting, but having come to it relatively late, I decided to go back to ground zero and watch series 1, episode 1 to see how the programme has evolved.

It opens with footage of diggers and cranes morphing into pyramids and Stonehenge; the inevitable speculation follows about how people equipped with sticks and copper wire built them. The

programme stakes its claim straightaway: it was aliens. In a trice, we are on to Exhibit A: the Saqqara Bird, a, well, bird-shaped carving found in the Pa-di-Imen tomb in 1898. Its outstretched wings are apparently evidence that it's a scale model of a full-sized, passenger-carrying glider (or a bird-sized model of a bird, but this isn't stressed especially.) It lacks tail elevators or any evidence of a power source, but that doesn't matter, as

*Pre-Columbian artefacts are "eerily reminiscent" of fighter aircraft*

the argument is that as it must be a glider, needing motive launch energy, and as the Egyptians lacked cars or bungees to launch... it was aliens. That it might just be a toy bird a junior pharaoh could lob off a pyramid for fun isn't even considered. The coincidentally named Robert Frisbee, ex-NASA, waves a child's gyroscope about to explain vimanas. Spoiler alert: it was aliens.

We have to wait a little while before we get to see the star in the making: Tsoukalos, with the hair that launched a thousand memes – though in those days his barnet was merely remarkable. Looking natty in tweed jacket and tie, he points out that pre-Columbian artefacts are “eerily reminiscent” of modern fighter aircraft, what with being pointy and triangular (cue helpful footage of a fighter plane): obviously, it was aliens. Once again, we see the series-wide

insistence that an ornament or toy must be a scale-model of something much bigger. The whole thing romps ahead at a sustained Gish gallop, flinging multiple nuggets at the viewer and leaving little time to question before moving onto the next pronouncement.

Today, 10 years and over 180 episodes later, the series continues to pose the same singular question – “Were we in prehistory visited by extraterrestrials?” – that Erich von Däniken asked 50-odd years ago. Repeated suggestions about aliens being the answer to everything aside, the closest the series has ever got to any definitive answer is stated in the first 15 minutes of the very first episode, as investigator Philip Coppens offers his exquisitely phrased response: “It becomes more apparent that the possible answer could be yes.” Maybe series 17 will discover the truth. I wouldn't hold your breath, though...

## THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

If you're pining for a movie where a werewolf 'Taylor Swift' records a new album while messily sucking on rabbit guts, try *Bloodthirsty* (£7.99, DVD) Here, a troubled singer/songwriter called Grey faces the true horror of all musicians: recording her second album. She's so desperate for success that she agrees to work at a remote house with the mysterious producer Vaughn – even though he's rumoured to have murdered his previous client. Producers are often credited with “drawing out the magic” from musicians, but Vaughn may be drawing out something monstrous instead. Grey suspects so, but the threat of a flop keeps her in the studio – and at the fridge, guzzling blood from a

plate of raw meat. Greg Bryck (as Vaughn) sips wine and stares with the right amount of menace, but it's harder for Lauren Beatty to shine, since her role is underwritten. We learn little about her character beyond her career insecurity and willingness to be a lapdog to Vaughn; this is arguably deliberate, showing the insecurity of young stars enslaved to industry star-makers. *Bloodthirsty* kept my attention, but for a film about music, it lacks a sense of melody.

*Climate of the Hunter* (on digital platforms), though, had me dancing; enjoyment levels will be directly linked to your tolerance for 'arty' horror. That's because Mickey Reece's vampire soap isn't just off-the-wall... it's practically out-the-

window-and-down-the-street. Middle aged sisters Alma and Elizabeth already bicker, but relations get dangerously complex when Wesley, an old friend, comes to stay at their woodland cabin. He's a smooth and stylish silver fox who quotes Baudelaire over dinner and shares colourful tales of his life in Paris high society. “I wish you weren't such a perfect man!” Elizabeth says – though his allure may have a darker source. The film isn't just weird, it's *confidently* weird. So, you just accept it when a dog starts talking or when the multiple dinner scenes open with a random narrator, reading out the menu. Yet it's not *only* weird. The wildness is grounded by fabulous performances and a strange, yet potent script. The quirk levels may leave some scratching their heads; others might call out the scenario of female slavishness to a man (just like Grey and

Vaughn in *Bloodthirsty*) as old-fashioned. Yet, I ate up this blatantly retro, offbeat movie, particularly the melodramatic zooms and the grainy look.

Finally, we have a fortean thriller from Lucio Fulci. *The Psychic* (£16.99, Blu-ray) sees the impeccably dressed Jennifer O'Neill annoying her very rich husband with visions of a woman's bloodied corpse, bricked up behind a wall in their villa. With the help of a paranormal investigator, she tries to figure out every detail of the vision. Can she solve the murder before becoming a victim herself? It's a twisty, complex whodunit, with enthusiastic nods to Hitchcock and Poe; yet despite Fulci being known as the “godfather of gore”, it's mostly restrained. It's ironic to see that, unlike the new films discussed above, it takes a 50-year-old Fulci movie to give us a fully independent woman who doesn't need men to solve her problems...





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Going through a newly delivered box of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* recently, I came across a few copies which have extra pages accidentally bound into them. This gives each book two extra blank spreads at the front and back, as extra flyleaves. I've drawn full size sketches on these extra pages, and so I have two unique copies (Book 2 and Book 3) to sell, containing these original drawings.

Pictured here are the drawings in Special Book 2 - look online to see those in Book 3.

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# LETTERS

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## Small aliens

With regard to Nick Guitard's letter pooh-poohing the possible existence of tiny aliens [FT405:71], I would like to make the following observations. David Bowie, may he rock on, once said that the Internet is like an alien being has landed and that we are in a process of negotiating how to live with it. That the adjustment process would be a social upheaval. This was before Facebook, Twitter and so forth. Now, part of the Internet's activity is the gleaning of commercially valuable information on individuals. This is done with the use of Artificial Intelligence programs known collectively as Intelligent Agents. I propose that these do constitute "tiny aliens living among us". I know it sounds like a bit of a stretch. However, it is interesting to consider that, when it comes to the Internet, descriptions of size in physical terms are confusing. How large is a program? How large is a microchip? Infuriatingly small, yet they have moved to the centre of our lives.

Also, there is a protein called kinesin that has the microbiological function of transporting resources along microtubules in living cells, and these kinesin proteins look remarkably similar to tiny walking people in the computer simulations. In much the same way that Edgar Allen Poe seemed to predict particle physics with his prose poem "Eureka", it may be that a similar mystical allegory has emerged when we anthropomorphise the soulless kinesin molecules. "As above so below," we intone to ourselves, awestruck. The artists reach the truth before the scientists, and so in turn the mythos of tiny aliens has finally been reified by information technology.

**James Wright**  
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

## Blue glass

I've enjoyed SD Tucker's trilogy of weird Latin American leaders, and a reference to General Maximiliano Martinez's belief in the curative powers of blue-tinted glass [FT406:50-53] reminded me of a book that is probably familiar

## SIMULACRA CORNER



Miriam Fraser spotted Satan on the pavement in St Pancras, London.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to [sieveking@forteantimes.com](mailto:sieveking@forteantimes.com).

to many readers, but is well worth re-reading or adding to one's library: *Banvard's Folly: Thirteen Tales of Renowned Obscurity, Famous Anonymity and Rotten Luck* by Paul Collins (Picador 2001). There is not only a chapter regarding General Augustus Pleasanton's *The Influence of the Blue Ray of the Sunlight and the Blue Color of the Sky*, as mentioned in Tucker's article, but ones devoted to, among others, the 18th century Shakespeare forger William Ireland (with a companion chapter on Delia Bacon, who went mad trying to prove Francis Bacon really was "Shakespeare"); George Psalmanazar, the "Formosan" imposter; and Robert "Romeo" Coates, regarded in his time as the worst actor ever to tread the boards.

**Christopher DiGrazia**  
Bradford, Massachusetts

## Festival dates

Tina Rath agrees with Jarett Kobek that Christian festivals are not, in fact, borrowed from those of the Pagans [FT404:72, 406:73]. She states, correctly, that Easter was borrowed from the Jewish Passover, which is held at a time determined by the spring equinox and the Full Moon in the month of Nisan. But this has more than a passing resemblance to the Babylonian New Year, which was held at a time determined by the spring equinox and the Full Moon in the month of Nisannu. This was certainly a Pagan festival, and is known to have been held as early as the Third Dynasty of Ur, which came to an end in 2006 BC. According to the Bible (2 Kings

23:23), the Jews first celebrated the Passover in 621 BC, so it is clear who was copying whom. If Easter and Passover really commemorated historical events, then their dates would not alter depending on the Moon.

As to the date of Christmas, when Julius Caesar inaugurated the Calendar that is named after him, the winter solstice fell on 25 December – but he took the year to be exactly 365.25 days long, when it is actually slightly shorter. The result was that by the 16th century the Julian Calendar was behind the Solar year by 13 days, so Pope Gregory XIII engaged an astronomer named Luigi Lollio to rectify this. For some reason, Lollio added only nine days to the Calendar, when he should have added 13, so that in the Gregorian Calendar Christmas Day is permanently four days out of step with the solstice. This is actually convenient for modern Pagans, as it enables us both to celebrate the solstice and to attend a conventional family Christmas.

**Gareth J Medway**  
By email

## Lippy parrot

Re parrots behaving badly: the pet parrot of Nicolai Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator, started calling out "stupid Nicu" in reference to the dictator's son. The Securitate, the country's feared secret police, interrogated the bird for days in order to find out who taught it to say this. When they failed to do so they had the bird strangled.

**Phil Brand**  
London

## Edible dormice

One householder to be plagued by edible dormice [FT408:4] was Peter Russell (1921-2003), one of last century's most prolific and underrated poets. About 25 years ago, in his own periodical *Marginalia*, he described how a family of edible dormice living under the roof of his house in Tuscany had "torn to shreds" some of his papers ([emt.it/riviste/marginalia/Marginalia21.pdf](http://emt.it/riviste/marginalia/Marginalia21.pdf)). This closely parallels a passage in Juvenal, where opici mures ("tone-deaf rodents") nibble the manuscript collection of a poor man called Cordus (*Satires* 3.207).

**Richard George**  
St Albans, Hertfordshire

## Cigar-shaped

It is often commented that with smart phones so common these days, there ought to be a wealth of photos of anomalous phenomena. But it's not enough to have a camera, one also needs the presence of mind to use it. A while ago I was sitting in my study late one afternoon when I saw something quite curious in the distance. It appeared to be a glowing cigar-shaped object moving slowly from right to left across the sky. Of course, I should have grabbed a camera and captured what would have been a wonderful bit of UFO footage, and as I describe it here, it sounds like a classic UFO observation. That I didn't was partly due to not thinking of it until too late, and partly due to the fact that I knew exactly what it was. It was actually a passenger aircraft flying almost directly away from me. Because of the angle of its flight, its contrail was extremely foreshortened so that it looked cigar-shaped. One is used to seeing contrails from the side, not end-on. And it was glowing because it was lit up by the rays of the setting sun. I knew that this is what it was, because I had seen the same plane fly over my house a minute or two previously. But without that knowledge, if I had managed to film it, I think people would think it was a very clear UFO encounter.

**Roger Musson**  
Edinburgh



# LETTERS

## Drowned village

David Clarke's piece on the drowned village of Derwent [FT405:58] brought back vivid childhood memories. My grandfather O'Brien told me the story of the lost homes that sat at the bottom of the reservoir, along with the spire of the church that poked above the surface of the water in a drought, as we walked through the countryside surrounding it. I can remember him telling me with conviction, while pointing out onto the water, that he'd seen the spire himself when he was younger. He knew the local area and its history well, and on top of that was an engineer for the water board, so had worked at the reservoir in question. It's hard to think of a more reliable source of information for my seven-year-old self. Only the reservoir in question wasn't that of the Peak District's Upper Derwent Valley but the other Derwent Reservoir, next to Pow Hill outside of Consett in County Durham.

Until reading David Clarke's piece, I was certain a lost village was hidden below the water there. Now, having looked into it, I can find no records of this being the case. Did my grandfather believe what he told me and what he claimed to have seen – or did he knowingly swap the site of the lost village for the sake of a good story? I thought readers would be interested in this further example of how local legends are built up and can emerge from seemingly empty depths.

**Greg Maughan**

*Sunderland, Tyne & Wear*

## ABCs

I really can't buy the "daimon" explanation that Merrily Harpur proposes for ABCs [FT406:32-36]. It violates a basic principle of any serious investigation: don't make explanations any more complicated than they need to be (Occam's Razor). I am not saying I disbelieve in supernatural entities, I just think that if it looks like a big cat and moves like a big cat, then it probably is a big cat.

Harpur cites a few examples of atypical ABCs that don't fit known categories. The lynx-like cat with tufted ears, and puma-like body sounds to me like a caracal, a fairly large African cat that is a popular exotic pet. The others sound like melanistic leopards or jaguars. As for cats on remote Scottish islands, what better place for the stealthy release of a troublesome pet from the back of a van? Easier than in a heavily populated area down south. Or in a picturesque tourist hotspot, where a party of ramblers could suddenly appear over a hill. And surely railway lines, especially disused ones, are the ideal way to travel across country? No traffic, no people. That's why I like to walk them myself occasionally. No need to bring "Taoist-style energy lines" into it. As for crossing the road when a car just happens to be coming along – well, we don't know how often they cross when there are no cars. They have to cross some time and in a densely populated country like Britain maybe they have just got used to cars.

If these cats are supernatural

in nature then how come they seem to be sighted mainly in the UK and primarily in modern times? Why don't we hear of them so much from other countries or from historic accounts of a few centuries ago? Wouldn't supernatural big cats be more at home in Africa or South America as part of the folklore of those places? In the same way that northern countries have supernatural wolf-like or bear-like creatures.

I don't entirely discount legends of strange supernatural cats. The large black demonic cat associated with Killakee House in County Dublin is one example. But those sightings had definite paranormal aspects to them. I suppose the main problem with cryptid creatures is their sheer elusiveness. Why are there no remains, no material traces? This is what lends itself to the sense of the paranormal. It could just be their rarity but I will leave that for others to speculate upon.

**Michael Sherlock**

*Limerick, Eire*

In her article 'Anomalous Big Cats' Merrily Harpur suggests that there is a dearth of physical evidence for feral big cats in the UK; Yet on the next page [FT406:37] Paul Sieveking tells us that Dr Andrew Hemmings of the Royal Agricultural University has identified bite marks in five animal carcasses from the UK that could only have been made by a non-native cat. Harpur seems to have forgotten that exotic cats have been killed and caught in the UK. Prints and kills have also been found. The puma I saw on the outskirts of Exeter was no 'daimon'. I also examined a sheep kill in North Devon that recalled big cat kills I have seen in Africa. No spook dislocates a ram's neck, strips off its skin, neatly picks out the internal organs and rasps the intact bones clean of meat. Not long after Centre for Fortean Zoology members found hair in a wood about a mile from the farm the kill occurred on, Lars Thomas of Copenhagen University, an expert on mammal hair, positively identified it as leopard hair.

I am not against the idea of some 'monsters' being, for want

of a better word, paranormal in origin. The subject is very well tackled in Janet and Colin Bord's *Alien Animals*, Graham J McEwan's *Mystery Animals of Great Britain and Ireland*, John Keel's *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* and Loren Coleman and Jerome Clark's *Creatures of the Outer Edge*. But Merrily is using her brother Patrick's book *Daimonic Reality* as a backing for her theories. This book is not as persuasive as the other volumes mentioned. There is no need to evoke the paranormal when the animals in question are behaving like real flesh and blood big cats. They are not walking around on their hind legs or being seen in tandem with UFOs. Real life big cats are cryptic by nature, elusive and hard to observe.

**Richard Freeman**

*Centre for Fortean Zoology*

## Up hill, down dale

Further to the letter about railways always going *up to* London and *down from* London [FT399:68]: hereabouts in South Wales, the railway franchise is Valley Lines, and because of the severe gradients of the railway, all trains are officially *down to* Cardiff and *up from* Cardiff. When I was a child, there was a watering point for steam locomotives at Dinas Rhondda. If the engine driver missed this point on the down line, it was not possible to reverse against the gradient. There used to be a request train stop at Cefn Onn, at the downside exit of the Caerphilly Tunnel. It was not always possible for the train driver to stop against the gradient, so people sometimes missed the train. The station still exists, but is overgrown and abandoned.

The roads are the same – every year, the Sinclair C5 Owners Club of Merthyr coast their vehicles 15 miles down to Coed Duon. I don't know how they get home. Maybe they never do. This is why the south-east of Britain is so crowded; people roll there by the force of gravity and can't get home again. So it should really be *down to* London.

**Viv Hobbs**

*Caerphilly, Wales*

## Magic snack

I spotted this cream advertisement in Worcestershire, for a company that reckons its ice cream is supernatural. I honestly don't know if they meant Super Natural, as in Very Organic Ingredients Indeed. It was a pleasant enough ice cream – but nothing out of the ordinary occurred when I ate it, or afterwards.

**Lorna Stroup Nilsson**

*Princetown, Devon*







## The offerkast

Maud's Elm [FT406:44-48] got me thinking of the Swedish *offerkast*, a pile of sticks thrown by the road to ward off bad luck and being chased by ghosts. In Ekerö, close to Stockholm, there used to be a very old *offerkast*, where people threw sticks and other things, to ward off the evil spirit residing there. There are several stories about people being chased by evil spirits, and horses refusing to pass this *offerkast*.

There are two different folktales about how it began. One was of a woman being accused of kidnapping a small child, the other about a woman having killed her husband. In both cases the woman had to run to church, while having people throw stones at her, to prove



Fantan's hög in 2018

her innocence. In both stories, a stone hit her on the head and killed her. After that, her spirit started tormenting passers-by, so in order to stay safe from her anger, people threw sticks and other things onto the grave (she was apparently buried at the site) to pass by safely.

In 1947 the road was

widened and the pile had to be removed. Archæologists examined the pile before removal and found coins from the 16th and 17th centuries, so the custom must have antiquity. At the bottom of the pile, they found an Iron Age barrow, and in it the remains of a woman buried between 550 and 100 BC.

So did people see the barrow and decide to honour whoever was buried there by leaving sticks and stones, and the story grew from there? The strangest thing, though, is that it is called Fantan's pile, and Fenta is an old Swedish word for young girl. After the pile had been removed, the custom kept on, so even today there is a pile close to the site.

**Cecilia Orning**  
By email

## Pentagon UAP Report

I can understand why Nigel Watson [FT408:30] wishes to shine the spotlight of disappointment in the direction of the ET lobby when referring to the recently published Pentagon UAP report. But, despite his careful prose, I detect a certain degree of damage limitation on his part. For years now, UFO sceptics, such as Dr David Clarke, have trumpeted the MOD's oft-repeated mantra that UFOs were of no defence significance. And they have also presented a case very much along the lines of "Move along! There's nothing to see here!" UFOs, we were told, were little more than dodgy radar returns and the product of overactive imaginations. Essentially, the phenomenon was an elaborate urban legend fuelled by Cold War angst and sociological/cultural factors.

However, the Pentagon report clearly doesn't agree with that thesis. It states that UAPs are real and do have implications for national defence. In my view this creates a couple of gaping holes in the sceptics' case. Furthermore, those anxious to avoid any ET dimension latch on to the report's focus on the possibility that UAPs are highly advanced terrestrial (albeit non-US) technology.

*Continued on page 76*

## Space Liberace

I enjoyed Jeffrey Vallance's article "Space Liberace" [FT408:32-39], which related reports of the deceased flamboyant entertainer descending from the heavens in a UFO in order to perform a medley of Hollywood show-stoppers on a floating piano. Vallance notes that "three songs have been written on the theme of the extraterrestrial Liberace". I am surprised he doesn't reference another song, which although it doesn't refer to Liberace as being extraterrestrial as such, does seem to exemplify a very similar theme. The song in question is "The Ghost of Liberace" by Sparks from their 1994 album "Gratuitous Sax and Senseless Violins". This song tells how the ghost of Liberace "hovers over farmland, lingers over towns" and "sometimes he blinds the driver with his shiny suits". However, his reception isn't exactly welcoming with him being "hung in effigy", while later we hear: "Oh no, now they're throwing cans of beer / Oh no, I thought ghosts could disappear." However, the ghost of Liberace is very persistent and is eventually able to sway the crowd of people and earn himself a round of ap-

plause (it doesn't say enthusiastic, but I believe that is implied). So yes, we're dealing with a Spooky Liberace rather than Space Liberace but the parallels are there. It makes me think that the Sparks brothers, Ron and Russell Mael, must have been aware of the original *Daily Star* "report" from 1989 or else heard of the mythology following it.

**Gavin Lloyd Wilson**  
Pembrokeshire, Wales

## Ghost maybe?

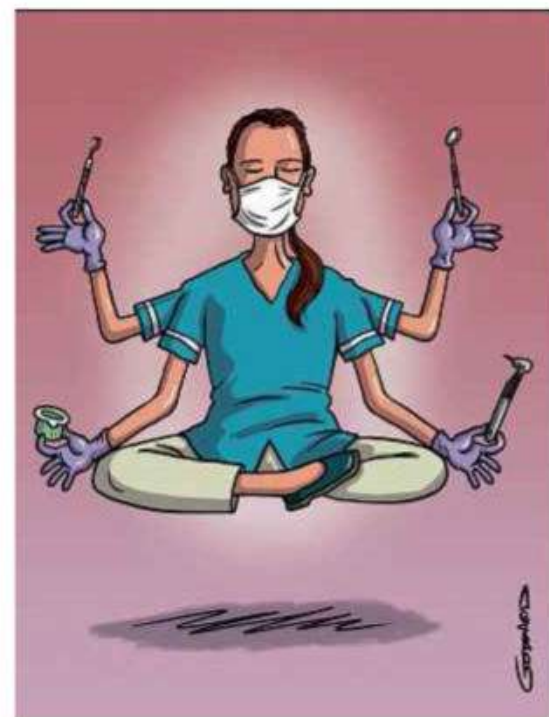
Take a look at Alan Murdie's photo of Whispering Corner at Lytchett Matravers in Dorset [FT399:19]. On the path snaking off into the distance there seems to be a human figure standing or walking under the overhanging trees. It could be a passer-by, or maybe – just maybe – a ghost?

**Andy Owens**  
Halifax, West Yorkshire

*Editor's note: Mathew Jackson from Dorchester and Brian McTaggart from Dundee also drew our attention to this enigmatic form.*

**Alan Murdie responds:**  
*I confirm that the odd black shape in said photograph is*

*in fact myself. I spent several hours at the site last year, taking photographs and filming and trying to determine if there was anything unusual that might account for the reported noises. In the process, I captured myself on several occasions in the course of filming. Personally, I would have been surprised if anything inexplicable did turn up on any of my images; my own view remains that actual apparitions cannot be captured on camera, being akin to dreams and mental inner visions experienced by witnesses. I do not discount the possibility that some anomalies might affect sensitive recording equipment and apparatus, but in my view such images as I have seen do not amount to "photographing a ghost", however much people wish for such a thing to be possible (I once did myself). I neither saw nor heard anything unusual during my time at this tranquil spot; equally I did not find anything that seemed able to clearly account for the sounds that Rodney Legg stated he heard there in the 1960s.*



Transcendental Hygienist



# It Happened to Me...

## No direction home

What contributes to a sense of place? For months after I passed my driving test I could not travel anywhere in my home city without first motoring to a branch of Tesco that was some miles from my home. I could not orientate myself, could not begin to work out how to get from my house to where I needed to go, without first placing myself at this supermarket. I could 'see' where I wanted to be in my mind's eye, could visualise key features of my destination, yet could not work out the route straight from my home, however simple it was.

In the 20 years since then, little has changed. Routes to new places need to be travelled over and over again before I can navigate them without getting completely disorientated. This applies also to journeys on foot and to very short trips within a confined area. I have worked in a small building of three floors for five years and still find myself stumbling around in a search for the loo if I approach it from a less familiar starting point, or if my mind is elsewhere when I begin the short walk. After moving to a new office, it took me over two years to work out the spatial relationship between where I park my car and my room, despite them being only around 50 feet (15m) apart. I am very embarrassed about my issues, and few colleagues know that the real reason why I am often late for meetings is that I have got lost on the way. I also cannot recall faces or names easily at all.

I know my left from my right very well, have an excellent memory for how places and landmarks look, and have navigated systems like the Paris Metro on my own because I can follow logical sequences with ease – it's just that I seem to lack the internal compass that would



## *The wood seemed completely new, carrying a new atmosphere...*

get me to station B from station A above ground. Perhaps counter-intuitively, I dislike using sat-nav systems as they seem to disrupt this compass even further; I feel unsafe when using them as they remove any remaining sense of where I am in space. Often I think I am in place X – it looks and feels *so much* like place X – but, to my surprise, I am instead in place Y. My partner will sometimes ask, "Do you know where you are yet?" in awe that I have no clue whatsoever. He says he would hate to feel quite so lost for so much of the time. I know I'm far from alone, however. 'Topographical disorientation' is something of interest to scientists, and various theories of the neurocognitive underpinnings of navigation

exist that seek to explain why I come out of a shop through the same door I entered and have absolutely no idea where I am.

My brain registers a sense of place, and an emotional response to an area, but never a route to it. So the atmosphere of a space is extremely pronounced for me. It is much more that simply whether it is pretty, or noisy, or dark, or pleasantly scented: rather than merely using my senses, it's a total 'sense' of being there, a depth of feeling for a place. I find it hard to put this reaction to the entirety of it into words.

It is disconcerting when it happens, but sometimes a certain 'atmosphere' of a place that I know extremely well can change, and it can seem as though I am encountering it for the very first time. This happened yesterday [5 June 2021], while out on a walk with my family through woods that are close to my home. We took a slight detour up a steep path that we'd never walked before,

through an area strewn with bluebells. Although I knew we were travelling along a route that was parallel to our normal path but a little higher, once we had moved into the new part of the woodland my wider reaction to the whole place changed completely. We followed this overgrown path for about 15 minutes, and when we climbed back down to the normal route the whole wood seemed completely new: not in terms of being unrecognisable (I knew the bridge, the steps and so on), but of carrying a new atmosphere for me. They simply felt different; almost a feeling of being there for the very first time.

I was intrigued that I seemed to be able to control this by not concentrating on my memory of the place and by just being in the present. This feeling of the familiar as unfamiliar continued for a considerable time after. It remained even as we walked home, back through places that we travel through several times a week (including our little town centre) and contin-



ued for at least 10 minutes after we got home. Even my garden and house felt oddly different. After being home for a short time there was then a point when things seemed to slide back into familiarity. This has happened on more than one occasion, and I have to admit that the slip back to normal is always rather disappointing. These are times when I seem to find being 'lost' enjoyable rather than frustrating or horribly embarrassing.

I also think that these events evoke unusual experiences that I had regularly as a young child. I recall, very clearly, being able to take myself 'out' of a place so as to feel a complete detachment from my surroundings. It included people too. With a kind of non-concentration I could achieve this altered awareness at will, and the end result was rather as though I was 'looking down' on myself in a scene (though I could not see myself) and other family members in it. I remember that I enjoyed the very strange sensation, and also remember how sad I felt when I realised I couldn't do it anymore. I think I was around eight or nine when I could no longer reach this altered state. I have never been able to summon this sensation since, but in recent months I have realised that my occasional, entirely accidental, moments of feeling completely unsure in very familiar places evoke rather similar sensations.

I have been thinking about these 'place slip' events and whether other people experience them. They are the exact opposite of déjà vu moments, in that I have a feeling that I have not lived through a situation before. For those of us who seriously lack wayfinding capabilities, I wonder whether our sense of the here-and-now, of the *totality*, of a place may be much more pronounced than it is to others who are less geographically/navigationally challenged. We know where we are, but often not how we got there, after all. I also wonder whether this might explain why the well-known can suddenly feel enjoyably

novel should a new route in or around it be taken, as any tiny remnants of the already poorly functioning internal compass would be damaged. I would be interested to find out if others experience similar sensations.

**Kate Firks**

*Ashburton, Devon*

## Voice of authority

Quite a few years ago, probably around 2007/8, I was in Germany, visiting my brother and his wife who were trying to start a family. Sitting at the breakfast table one morning, I watched my sister-in-law doing stuff in the kitchen, and thought idly "they're going to make such great parents". Immediately, a male voice in my head replied: "It's not going to happen, you know." This was not my usual internal 'thought' voice, which is similar to my own speaking voice, but an unknown, unfamiliar and very authoritative man's voice. It felt louder than my own internal voice. I asked it/him why not, and he explained that my brother was infertile (I don't remember the exact wording of the response, but I think it included the phrase "his sperm's no good").

I told my husband and daughters about this odd episode when I returned home, so I know that I did not manufacture the memory later, when we found out that both my brother and his wife had severely reduced fertility. They went through a few rounds of IVF, but never had a child.

I am sharing this because it would be interesting to hear if anyone else has had this kind of "voice of God" without the religious conditioning!

**Linda Duke (pseud)**

*Reigate, Surrey*

## Missing time

In 1993 I moved from Cheltenham in Gloucestershire to Kent. About six times every year, I went back to visit or collect friends. I always drove along the M25, the M4 and the A217 and the journey took two and a quarter hours.

Sometime in the early 2000s, I was driving a friend back to Cheltenham. We left just after 10am so we would get to her house about lunchtime. We drove without any interruption, traffic jams or hold-ups and stopped at Membury Services (pictured below) for coffee and a comfort break. The coffee shop was empty apart from one other person, which surprised us, as it was a Saturday with plenty of traffic. Consequently we were in the area only about 20 minutes.

When we arrived at her house I commented that I was starving hungry, which was odd because we had had a late breakfast. When I looked at her kitchen clock it said 3.30pm. Thinking it was wrong, we checked our watches – but it was right.

In after years we often discussed the event with amusement and called it the 'alien abduction trip', although neither of us had any odd feelings about it. We confirmed we had not been held up by any traffic at any point on the journey. My friend had checked her watch as we entered the M4 and it was 10.45, the correct time for the usual journey. So somewhere between Windsor and Cheltenham we had lost over three hours.

There is no explanation we can think of. I have often driven the same journey since but it always takes two and a quarter hours.

**Elizabeth Lloyd-Folkard**

*By email*



## Rat-a-tat-tat

Alan Murdie's feature 'Haunted Pages' [FT406:22-25] has reminded me of something I witnessed in 1984. I was living in a three-storey terrace house in Tufnell Park, north London, which I was in the process of doing up. Alone at home one evening, I had gone to bed early and was deeply engrossed in reading Alan Gauld's and Tony Cornell's 1979 classic *Poltergeists* when I heard what I quickly took to be the sound of brass drop handles loudly rat-a-tat-tatting in unison against the brass back plates of a Victorian chest of drawers in a room on the floor below.

Could I be experiencing an entry-level poltergeist phenomenon of the sort I had just been reading about? I immediately jumped out of bed to investigate, but as soon as I got to the top of the stairs, a sudden fear of what I might discover got the better of me and I slunk back to bed. I continued to hear the rat-a-tat-tatting sound for more than long enough to feel sure that it came from the chest of drawers.

I am still sure of this. I remember the whole episode very clearly. I was fully wide awake – not in a hypnagogic state or any other non-normal state of consciousness – and I am not given to imagining things. Who or what caused the handles to rattle? Was it my unconscious mind through the power of psychokinesis (PK) or was it a discarnate agent of some sort (such as a poltergeist as traditionally understood)? I find the discarnate agency alternative by far the more plausible.

In his book *The Poltergeist* (1972), William G. Roll says that, if you want to know what people really believe, watch what they do, not what they say. However open I might have been at the time to the idea that I caused the rat-a-tatting myself, through PK, my freezing at the top of the stairs suggests that deep down I didn't believe this to be the case. I wonder what I would do now if I had the same experience again.

**Ted Dixon**

*Highgate, London*



# LETTERS

*Continued from page 73*

But how likely is that? What are we saying? Russia, a country not economically powerful enough to be included in the G8, can produce aerial machines way beyond anything the US are capable of? OK, the Chinese possibly can, but if they have had that technology since the early sightings in 2004, how come nothing much has been done with it since? Does that sound like the China we know? And just maybe there is an Ernst Stavro Blofeld out there somewhere, employing mad scientists to build flying saucers, but to my mind that smacks of special pleading. So, when the report allowed for the possibility of ET involvement, they were not “pandering to the alien lobbyists and believers” – as Nigel Watson condescendingly puts it – but stating a logical corollary to their investigations. The spotlight of disappointment can shine in both directions.

**Geoff Clifton**

*Solihull, West Midlands*

## Levitation

I have just finished reading *Human Levitation* by Preston Dennett, which covered both East and West, from Catholic saints to eastern mystics, Spiritualist mediums and spontaneous cases of various sorts (childhood, crisis, sleep etc). He also points out other cases where people don't actually fly but achieve weightlessness or negate the effects of gravity somewhat – walking on water or fast running, where people cover vast areas of ground in double quick time and without exhaustion, like a string puppet suspended above the surface (Nijinsky the Russian ballet dancer defied gravity in his dancing but never actually flew or levitated).

In yogic tradition these skills can be consciously developed, but elsewhere it seems to be unconscious. However, in both East and West asceticism seems to be practised to achieve the necessary state for such phenomena to occur. There are links to poltergeist activity and other psychic manifestations, such as telekinesis or bilocation (body in one place, spirit in another).

In fact, Saint Stanislaw seems to have controlled the weather, like the American Indian Rolling Thunder was seen to do.

Related to levitation itself is the ability to create the opposite effect of becoming heavier than normal gravity's effect on the body allows, so the person cannot be budged – or to nullify it, so that the person weighs nothing at all (see the deathbed measurement experiment, where someone was weighed just before and just after death, revealing a slight loss of weight). Light is also associated with levitation, in about half the cases described in the lives of Catholic saints and indeed in some other cases, meaning that light in both senses is applied to these cases – light in body and luminescent in appearance, hence halos being associated with saints.

Is it any coincidence that saints are bathed in light and that the dying are encouraged to head there by spiritual healers? In mathematics we are told to find the common denominator. The same point made by Sherlock Holmes in one of the fictional character's most famous quotations: “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

So what can be said about the phenomena? St Joseph of Copertino showed that it had nothing to do with either God or the Devil, but with reaching an ecstatic state when in the presence of religious symbols or the natural world in all its beauty. In other words, his open enthusiasm for life launched his enthusiastic flights of fancy. Demonic or angelic? We see people persecuted as witches for exhibiting the same skills as those exalted as saintly. Authority either condemns or praises these abilities – shoots them down or allows them to fly unheeded.

Explanations vary across cultures, but the phenomenon

remains the same, indicating the cause is not known, but unconscious ability occurs anyway. Beliefs about causes are not the same as causes themselves. In altered states you are being, not doing or thinking. When you stop the self, you see that the world is moving (energy in motion). Being is direct experience, hard to verbalise effectively. Being there and engaging with what exists in the here and now is making a stand, to stay present.

Dennett gives the case of a woman who twice fell down stairs and halted in mid-flight. This is like the effect you see in films, where time stands still. I believe this relates to the Oz Factor as described by Jenny

Randles, in cases of UFO sightings and other weird events.

Bavadjee Natts believed that levitation was caused by positive and negative flow, directed by the mind

(concentration of attention down and in, or dispersal of it up and outwards); in other words, it is electrical energy that brings control (see *The Electric Universe Theory*, Wallace Thornhill et al, and Eric Laithewaite's attempts to build a railway engine that levitated, suspended above the rails through EM energy). The other world is one of energy as this one is more of a congealed form of this (matter). Hence perhaps this could explain why children find this ability easier than most adults, as they have come more recently from this other realm (on YouTube is a short video of a Russian child floating along a forest track, illustrating this ability). To recapitulate, we make things more solid through concentration and less solid (lightweight) by dispersal of attention; a cannon ball sinks in water but a balloon floats in air.

Levitation and other psychic powers are different from earthly (grounded) ones. Spirituality is more about wisdom or what you do with what you

have and why. This is the reason psychic abilities are seen as much as distractions on the path to enlightenment as earthly desires (Tibetan religion calls this spiritual materialism). This is why dissociation is associated with this phenomenon in all cases as is the need for renunciation of an ordinary lifestyle and the adoption of a more ascetic one instead. It also explains the modesty and wish to hide such abilities by adepts. Spirituality works in the background as materialism hogs the limelight. Watch the British TV series *Merlin*, where this theme is re-enacted in most episodes.

On the question of whether you have to be possessed to levitate or whether it is of your own volition, think of someone operating a lift for you versus you doing it yourself or having a co-pilot until you have learned to fly yourself. Poltergeist activity is uncontrolled energy as training leads to conscious control of that energy (think of a hose flapping about all over the place, shooting water everywhere as opposed to a fireman grabbing hold of it and directing the flow.) By the way, think of channelling as possession, but only on a temporary and voluntary basis as opposed to grand theft auto.

There may be a crossover into the field of UFOs as Gersi noted, in a power drain effect around electrical devices, which has also been seen around some flying saucer incidents, and indeed in hauntings (yes, the electrical connection again). Likewise, light phenomena are associated with UFOs in some cases and aliens are sometimes seen to float above the ground as in fast running cases in humans, rather than walking, leaving no footprints despite the ground being either sandy or muddy. Then there is their ability to walk through walls like a ghost, teleportation or becoming invisible, all mentioned as traits in the case of some levitators. Are the videos seen on YouTube human beings levitating (sorcerers or saints) or aliens... or maybe even both?

**Tony Sandy**

*By email*





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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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# PECULIAR POSTCARDS



**JAN BONDESON** shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past attempts to uncover the story behind a mysterious postcard of an unfortunate young man

## 20. EUGENIE, THE SUPER-FREAK



Some months ago, I purchased, through the medium of eBay and for very little money, a very strange picture postcard marked only 'Eugenie'. The individual on the card was not the last Empress of France, but actually a male: an unfortunate young lad with terrible deformities to his arms and hands. A little research shows that Eugenie made his show business debut at Pickard's Trongate Waxworks in October 1915. This was a large Glaswegian establishment that doubled as a music hall, a waxworks museum and a freak show. An early advertisement for Eugenie reads: "Terrific Sensation. First Appearance of Eugenie, the Unnatural Freak. Description Impossible. Now showing alive. Something to think over. Children not admitted by order of Police. Monstrosity only to be seen at Pickard's Trongate Waxworks." Later newspaper advertisements also pointed out that the police had forbidden any children entry to see "Eugenie, the Unnatural Monstrosity", who was a



**ABOVE LEFT:** A postcard showing the Trongate in Glasgow. **ABOVE RIGHT:** an Irish Giant at Pickard's. **LEFT:** The postcard showing Eugenie.

"Problem for the Scientists". In late December 1915, the *Glasgow Daily Record* commented that: "Additions continue to be made to the attractions at the Waxworks Trongate. Eugenie, the freak, is retained, and the Kilmarnock man of mystery, George Kirkland, is sure to interest all patrons. The final advertisement for "Eugenie, the unnatural super-freak", still paired with the Kilmarnock man of mystery, dates from New Year's Day 1916.

Thus, there is reason to believe that the 'Eugenie' on my postcard was the same severely deformed young lad, who enjoyed, if that is the word, a brief career in the freak show at Pickard's Trongate Waxworks in late 1915. He was advertised as an 'unnatural' freak or monstrosity, and children were not admitted to the shows.





Het Goese Wondermeisje, oud 12 jaar en half.  
L'enfant Phénomène de Goes, âgée 12 ans et demi.



LA FEMME-HOMARD

Admission was just twopence, and the Waxworks were open all day for poor Eugenie to be gawped at by all and sundry. The postcard, which would appear to be extremely rare today, is a poignant reminder of this degrading freak show, which would have raised eyebrows at the time of the Elephant Man, and which was entirely revolting by the standards of a civilised country as late as 1915. The look in Eugenie's eyes, as they meet those of the freak show photographer, seems to say: "I am not what I seem to be!"

To investigate what was wrong with Eugenie, the thinking cap must be firmly placed in position, the medical textbooks dusted off, and various online databases of genetics made use of. It is clear from the postcard that Eugenie had severe congenital defective development of the humerus, radius and ulna. The clavicles do not look normal either. There is oligosyndactily, with each hand having three unnaturally long, thick fingers. It is a great pity that the postcard does not show

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the lower extremities, although the abnormal positioning of the right thigh would seem to suggest that they were deformed as well. The available clinical evidence would indicate that Eugenie suffered from a variant

of what is today known as the Al-Awadi-Raas-Rothschild syndrome of congenital limb aplasia. This autosomally recessive syndrome has been postulated to be caused by a missense mutation in the



FAR LEFT: Two Dutch and French sideshow performers with the 'lobster-claw' deformity to their hands. LEFT: An advertisement for the freak show at Pickard's Trongate Waxworks. ABOVE: A Tattooed Lady at Pickard's.

WNT7A intercellular signalling protein, which is important for embryonic development. It has been presumed to be restricted to the Middle Eastern gene pool, but the freak show advertisements mention nothing of Eugenie having foreign antecedents; in the postcard, he is clearly depicted as a young Caucasian male, although it can of course not be ruled out that he had Jewish blood.

The bizarre name 'Eugenie' may well have been a freak show *nom-de-plume*, and nothing is known about the deformed young man's true identity. The archives for Pickard's Trongate Waxworks are kept at the University of Glasgow, but I am informed that there are no records for performers contracted in 1915. Thus Eugenie, the Elephant Man of Glasgow, remains a medical mystery, an isolated case of a truly anomalous deformity well-nigh unheard of in Scotland, then as well as now; nor can his true identity be ascertained, or any clue be obtained about what happened to him in the end, after his brief and anticlimactic freak show career.

This is an edited extract from Jan Bondeson's book *The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities* (Amberley Publishing, Stroud 2018).



# COMING NEXT MONTH



## DIGGING INTO DUNE

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# FORTEAN TIMES 411

ON SALE 7 OCT 2021

Photo by Fernando Paredes Murillo on Unsplash

# STRANGE DEATHS

## UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Mourners at the funeral of 79-year-old Claribel Oppenheimer at Evergreen Cemetery, Brooklyn, looked on with mounting horror as bickering cemetery staff attempted to jam her coffin into an undersized grave. After trying to force it to fit, repeatedly pulling and tugging it, the workers resorted to bringing in a digger to enlarge the grave, yelling, "Get out of the way" at mourners. They abandoned Mrs Oppenheimer's coffin on the grass while one worker unhelpfully told crying family members, "This section of the cemetery has had this problem before with coffins not fitting properly into the graves." By this time, the coffin had been so badly damaged that the body was exposed, and it had been shaken around so much that Mrs Oppenheimer's hands were no longer clasped as they had been at the funeral home and relatives feared she would fall out. After further argument about the state of the coffin, Mrs Oppenheimer was taken to a funeral home and transferred to a replacement casket, after which she was successfully consigned to her final resting place at last – but headfirst instead of horizontally. The whole ordeal lasted more than four hours during which one of the mourners collapsed with chest pain and was taken to hospital. The Oppenheimer family lawyer Eric Rothstein said, "No one should have to endure a situation like that at a funeral, it meant more grief, mental anguish that no one should have to suffer." *nypost.com*, 3 Aug 2021.

At 10am on 23 July, police and firefighters arrived at a small brushfire in Sherbrooke, Quebec, which, witnesses said, was caused by someone setting fire to a silicone mannequin. The blaze was swiftly extinguished, and the authorities agreed that the charred mannequin should be disposed of in a skip behind Sherbrooke police station. Four hours later a man filed a missing persons report for his partner, which police followed up by tracking her mobile phone data. Finding that her last known location was in the street where the fire had been extinguished that morning, "a police officer who intervened earlier raised the coincidence insightfully" according to a police spokesman. This led to officers retrieving the "mannequin" from the skip and identifying it as the body of the missing woman. Pathologist Dr Robert Nicholson said it wouldn't be unreasonable to mistake a burnt body



for a mannequin because the human body is composed of about 60 per cent water and loses a lot of weight if it is severely burned, resulting in remains that neither look nor feel like a normal person. At the time of reporting, police had not come up with a cause of the death, which does have characteristics that bring to mind spontaneous human combustion. *cbc.ca*, 29 July 2021.

A post-mortem report on former mayoress of Bolton, Delyse Critchley, concluded that the 68-year-old had died of caffeine poisoning. Critchley was found dead in her bed in Bolton on 8 April after police forced their way into her house following reports of concern for her welfare. Coroner Timothy Brennan said there were no suspicious circumstances and that "the cause of death is highly unusual in that the substance that clearly has been implicated being caffeine". It is possible to overdose on caffeine if you consume more than 400 milligrams in a day, about the amount in four strong cups of coffee, but it is not known how Mrs Critchley ingested the substance. *Mail on Sunday*, 20 June 2021.

Allen Smith (80), a retired Baptist minister, regularly visited the South Shore senior home where Ted Merchant (67), lived. Merchant was attempting to set up his own ministry, named Straight Gate, and often held services in the home. He and Allen spent a lot of time discussing scripture, and sometimes these discussions became heated. "They'd talk about Bible passages and ideas about God. They always had little arguments going on about things like that," said fellow resident Dorothy Hull. After one 2016 session, though, Merchant pulled a gun and shot Allen twice in the head, killing him instantly. After the killing, Merchant fled the scene on a motorised disability scooter, then hid in a car parked in the home's parking lot, where police found him five hours later. In Dogwood Extension, Waynesborough, Mississippi, another argument over Bible verses led to a similar outcome this July. Sherrod Alexander (32) and Samuel McDougle (41) were reading the Bible together when they hit a fundamental disagreement over one of the verses. This led to a fist fight that only ended when McDougle strangled Alexander to death. *Chicago Tribune*, 7 Sept 2016, *wlox.com*, 15 Jul 2021.



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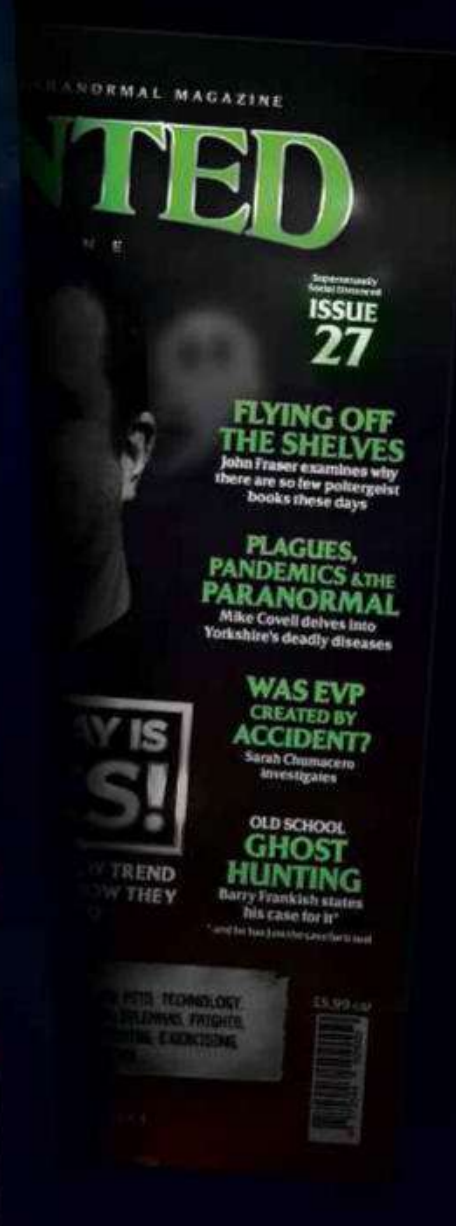
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